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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

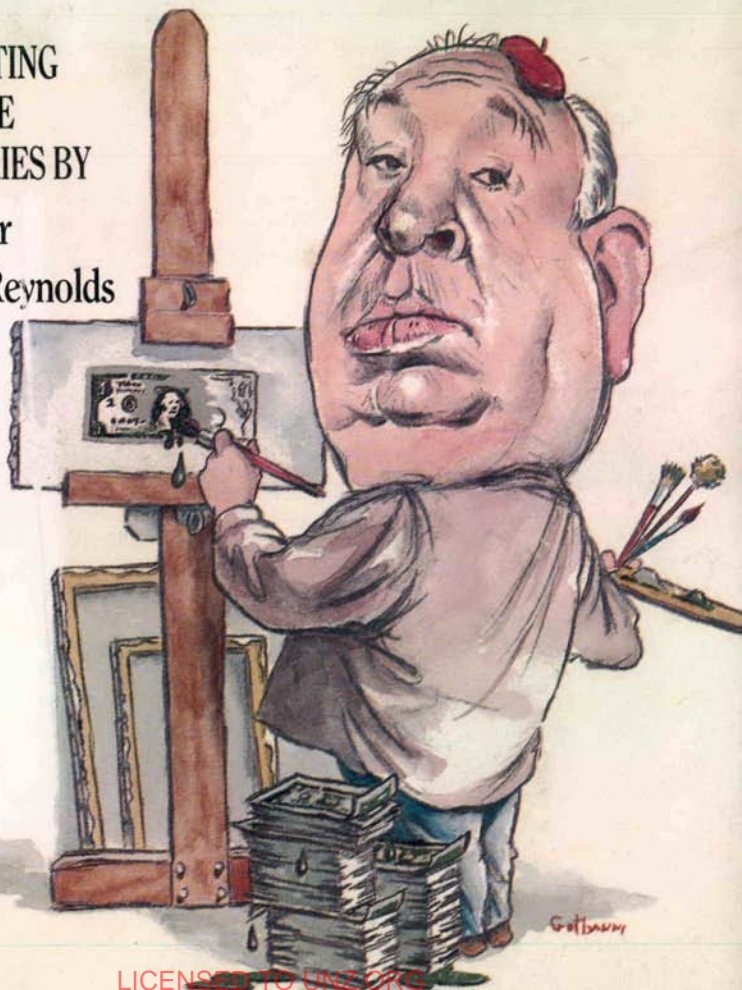
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COVER BY MARK GOTBAUM

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We are delighted to announce that we have some distinguished folks among us. (Not that we didn't know that anyway, but it's a great pleasure when they are formally recognized as being so.) During the recent Mystery Writers of America awards presentations, both John Lutz and Doug Allyn were honored with prizes—Lutz with an Edgar for Best Short Story of 1985, for "Ride the Lightning," published in our January 1985 issue, and Allyn with the Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of 1985, for "Final Rites," published in AHMM in December.

It is, by the way, the second year in a row (out of the three years since the Fish Award was instituted) that a story in AHMM has won the latter. Last year, you may recall, it went to Bill Crenshaw for "Poor Dumb Mouths."

Needless to say, we are very happy indeed for both of them,

and glad we were able to bring you their stories in this magazine.

Following are the nominees and winners in all the Edgar Award categories. The winners have been printed in bold face.

BEST NOVEL OF 1985:

***The Suspect* by L. R. Wright**
(Viking Penguin)

City of Glass: The New York Trilogy by Paul Auster (Sun & Moon Press)

A Shock to the System by Simon Brett (Scribners)

The Tree of Hands by Ruth Rendell (Pantheon)

An Unkindness of Ravens by Ruth Rendell (Pantheon)

BEST FIRST NOVEL OF 1985:

***When the Bough Breaks* by Jonathan Kellerman** (Atheneum)

The Glory Hole Murders by Tony Fennelly (Carroll & Graf)
Sleeping Dog by Dick Lochte (Arbor House)

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plasmic Man by Daniel Stashower (Morrow)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL NOVEL OF 1985:

***Pigs Get Fat* by Warren Murphy (NAL)**

Poverty Bay by Earl W. Emerson (Avon)

Broken Idols by Sean Flannery (Charter)

Blue Heron by Philip Ross (Tor)

Black Gravity by Conall Ryan (Ballantine)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1985:

"Ride the Lightning" by John Lutz (AHMM)

"What's in a Name?" by Robert Barnard (EQMM)

"Trouble in Paradise" by Arthur Lyons (New Black Mask)

"Yellow One-Eyed Cat" by Robert Twohy (EQMM)

"There Goes Ravelaar" by Janwillem van de Wetering (EQMM)

BEST JUVENILE NOVEL OF 1985:

***The Sandman's Eyes* by Patricia Windsor (Delacorte)**

On the Edge by Gillian Cross (Holiday House)

Locked in Time by Lois Duncan (Little, Brown)

Screaming High by David Line (Little, Brown)

Playing Murder by Sandra Scoppettone (Harper & Row)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1985:

***Savage Grace* by Natalie Ro-**

bins and Steven M. L. Aronson (Morrow)

Nutcracker: Money, Madness, Murder: A Family Album by Shana Alexander (Doubleday)

Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son: The Story of the Yorkshire Ripper by Gordon Burn (Viking Penguin)

At Mother's Request: A True Story of Money, Murder and Betrayal by Jonathan Coleman (Atheneum)

The Murder of a Shopping Bag Lady by Brian Kates (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)

The Airman and the Carpenter: The Lindbergh Kidnapping and the Framing of Richard Hauptmann by Ludovic Kennedy (Viking Penguin)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK OF 1985:

***John Le Carré* by Peter Lewis (Ungar)**

Private Eyes: 101 Knights: A Survey of American Fiction by Robert A. Baker and Michael T. Nietzel (Bowling Green State University Press)

The Lord Peter Wimsey Companion by Stephan P. Clarke (Mysterious Press)

The American Private Eye: The Image in Fiction by David Geherin (Ungar)

Agatha Christie by Janet Morgan (Knopf)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1985:

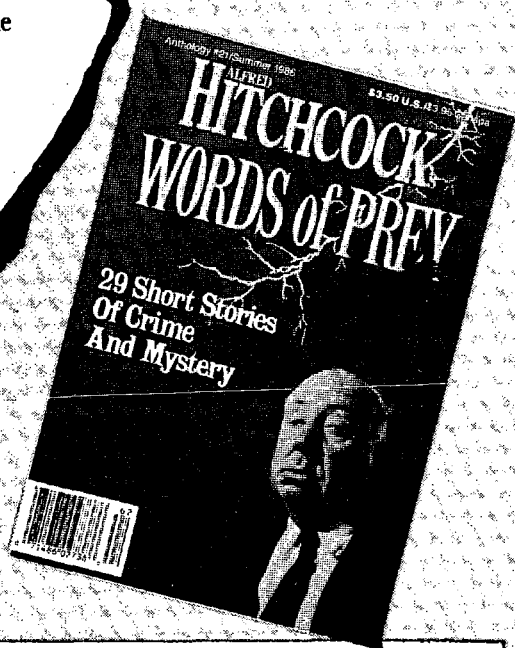
***Witness*, screenplay by Earl**

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W. Wallace and William Kelley, from a story by **William Kelley, Pamela Wallace, and Earl W. Wallace** (Paramount)

Fletch, screenplay by **Andrew Bergman**, from the novel by **Gregory McDonald** (Universal)

Blood Simple, screenplay by **Joel Coen and Ethan Coen** (Circle Films)

The Hit, screenplay by **Peter Prince** (Island Pictures)

BEST TELEFEATURE OF 1985:

Guilty Conscience, written by **Richard Levinson and William Link** (CBS)

Deadly Messages, written by **William Bleich** (ABC)

Doubletake, written by **John Gay**, from the novel *Switch* by **William Bayer** (CBS)

Love on the Run, written by **Sue Grafton and Steve Humphrey** (NBC)

Perry Mason Returns, written

by **Dean Hargrove** (NBC)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1985:

"The Amazing Falsworth," from *Amazing Stories*, written by **Mick Garris**, story by **Steven Spielberg** (NBC)

"The Dream Sequence Always Rings Twice," from *Moonlighting*, written by **Debra Frank and Carl Sautter** (ABC)

"Wake Me When I'm Dead," from *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, written by **Buck Henry**, story by **Lawrence Treat** (NBC)

SPECIAL PLAY AWARD:

The Mystery of Edwin Drood by **Rupert Holmes** (A New York Shakespeare Festival Production)

SPECIAL AWARD:

Detective and Mystery Fiction: An International Bibliography of Secondary Sources by **Walter Albert** (Brownstone Books)

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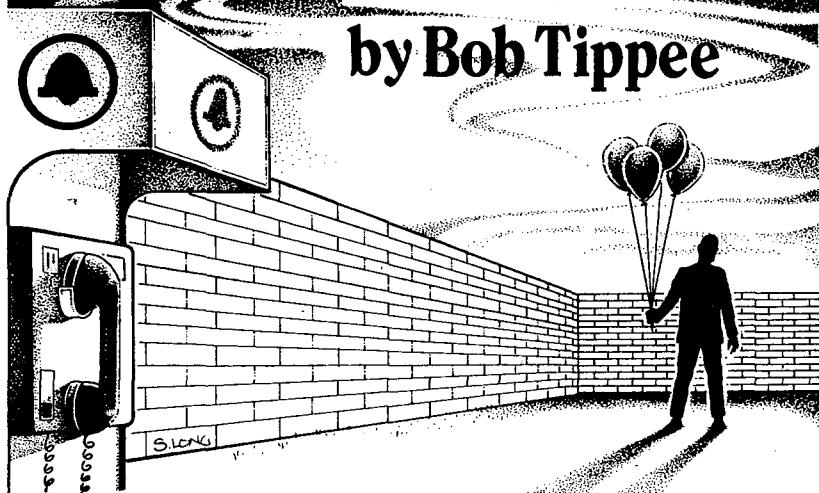
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Alfred Wascom's Telephone Balloons

by Bob Tippee



As far as Alfred Wascom could tell, all twenty or so of the bluejeaned men at the alley's other end were what remained of the brewery day shift, waiting for the late bus out of downtown. He wasn't thinking about them, anyway. He was thinking about the chill that sneaked through a hole in the elbow of his blue sweater, making his back and legs ache more than they would have otherwise this time of day. Tomorrow he would wear his green sweater. It had two buttons missing at the top but was thicker, and he could wear his grey mittens and hold the sweater together at his neck with the hand not clutching his balloon strings. He thought, as he had at the beginning of each winter for as long as he could remember, about asking someone at Ruth's Cleaners

Illustration by Steve Long

whether there was something a person could do about missing sweater buttons. But Ruth never said much about the rent Alfred owed for the room upstairs, so he decided to leave things the way they were.

People would quit buying balloons now that it was cold. In fact, they already had done so. Alfred had first noticed that he was shivering about three o'clock down by the lagoon's paddleboat docks; sure enough, he hadn't sold a balloon since then. If it got too bad he would have to take breakfasts and maybe an occasional supper at Salvation Army. Of course, Jack Swane would object.

"There's a principle involved," Jack would say when Alfred asked why eating at Salvation Army was so bad. Jack saw lots of things that Alfred could not, even though he was blind. But people didn't quit buying newspapers when it got cold the way they quit buying balloons so Jack never got quite as hungry as Alfred did. Jack's scorn was one of the things about winter that Alfred just had to endure, like sweaters with buttons missing.

Tightening his grip on the balloon strings in his right hand, Alfred wished he had his grey mittens now. The alley, which ran beside the five story, sooty-brick brewery on his left, never got much sun. Alfred thought that must have been why the owners never cleaned the wire-reinforced windows that overlooked the park. On the side of the alley opposite the brewery was a black iron park fence higher than a man could reach. Pine and grass smells from the park died in the alley when they mixed with auto exhaust and gasoline fumes from the busy street at the far end. Every evening at rush hour, in the alley by the workers' entrance of the brewery, Alfred met his friend Jack.

"That you, Alfred?" Jack asked in his gravelly voice. He sat in his red metal wagon, stacks of newspapers on either side, the cigar box where he kept his earnings on his lap. As always, he wore a blue sweatshirt with the collar of a red flannel shirt sticking out the top. Over the sweatshirt and baggy grey trousers he wore a denim printer's apron.

Alfred wished he could think of some clever greeting, like the people on television. "Yeah, Jack, it's me."

"Good day?"

"Eight." Alfred tied the strings of the four balloons that remained to the iron bars of the fence behind Jack.

"How many'd you give away?" Jack asked sternly.

Alfred cleared his throat. This was almost as bad to Jack as eating at Salvation Army. "I gave away two, but—"

"Alfred, you're not going to make the rent if you give your balloons away. And if you don't make the rent again you'll get evicted. Do you know what that means?"

Alfred thought it should have counted for something that he never asked about how to get sweater buttons fixed, but he didn't know how to explain his theory to Jack. Now he was confused and could only start talking and hope for the best.

"See, I saw Mrs. Gonzales and her two kids over by the zoo entrance, and I know they haven't got any money but they like the clear balloons with the smiling rabbits inside. I like the solid green ones better. Anyway—"

Jack stopped him with a sigh. "How much do you charge for the clear balloons with the smiling rabbits inside?"

"Dollar and a half."

"So you gave away three dollars to Mrs. Gonzales's kids."

Alfred half-leaned, half-sat against the concrete ledge at the base of the iron park fence. "But see, I sold Mr. Richardson a balloon this morning, and he gave me five dollars and let me keep the change."

"Who's Mr. Richardson?"

"He comes to the park in the afternoon. He wears a suit and a tie. I figure he's important. He buys balloons, and we talk. He always lets me keep the change."

"Does he ever buy newspapers?" Jack asked, chuckling.

"Gosh. I don't know. I'll ask."

Jack put his hand over his mouth and looked up, as though he were trying to keep from laughing. Alfred wondered what was so funny, but with Jack a person seldom knew.

"Is it light enough for you to read me the news?" Jack asked finally. "I'll help with the hard words."

For Jack, Alfred would do anything, even try to read a newspaper story out loud. He took one of the leftover papers off the stack on Jack's right. He could see the words if he held the paper high enough to catch the sky's fading glow. "Maybe one story if we hurry."

"Good," Jack said, setting his cigar box next to him in the wagon. "All I want to hear about is the drug investigation."

It was on the front page. Alfred tried to sound like the man who did the ten o'clock news on television. Jack had to help him a couple of times but didn't seem to mind. The story was about what the mayor was saying about what the police chief was saying about the investigation.

When he had finished the story, Alfred said, "I guess they're working pretty hard."

Jack rubbed his thighs with his hands and shook his head. "They don't even know where to begin looking."

There had been nothing like that in the story, but Jack would not have said what he did if he hadn't been certain.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Jack said, "if they weren't selling drugs to school kids." He slapped his thighs. "School kids!"

"Yeah, that's bad," Alfred said. "And now the police don't even know where to begin looking."

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Jack rubbed his thighs again. Then the city bus hissed to a stop at the end of the alley.

Jack said, "Well, I'm not going to sell any more newspapers here. Time to pack up."

He stood and made even stacks out of the newspapers he hadn't sold. Alfred watched the bus pull away. Four of the young men at the bus stop stayed behind. They turned into the alley, walking shoulder to shoulder toward Alfred and Jack.

Alfred's throat tightened. "Jack . . . I should have seen them. I didn't think they'd come back."

Jack lifted his head. "Who's that? . . . Oh, not again!"

"I'm sorry," Alfred said. "I'm sorry."

"Shush! They've never hurt us before. Don't let them know you're afraid." Jack sat atop the newspaper stacks in his wagon and picked up the cigar box. "Have we got time to hide this?"

"I'll take that," yelled one of the four troublemakers. Their blue-jeans were faded, their hair long and greasy. As always, they wore shiny, black jackets, smoked cigarettes, and walked with their hands in their rear pockets.

For a moment, Alfred forgot how frightened he should have been. "You can't do that!" he said to the skinny young man who took Jack's cigar box. Another youth grabbed Alfred's right wrist and jerked him against the park fence. "Quiet, gramps," he said, seeming to speak out of both sides of his mouth at the same time. He had narrow eyes and breathed cigarette smoke and beer fumes. "Let's have the money."

Alfred's wrist ached, and his back hurt where it had hit the fence.

"Better give them your money, Alfred." Jack's calm voice made Alfred feel as though handing over his earnings were the right thing to do. Alfred dug his free hand into the sweater pocket where he kept his money.

"Balloon business must be pretty good," snarled the young hoodlum, releasing Alfred's wrist in order to take the money.

Jack said, "If you have no use for the box, I'd like it back."

The man with Jack's box had the meanest eyes and greasiest hair and wickedest grin and was obviously the leader of the little gang. After stuffing his jacket pocket with Jack's money he sailed the cigar box over the park fence.

"Aw, it got away," he said. He turned to his chuckling companions and said, "Let's split."

Before Alfred had caught his breath the gang was lost in the darkness of the alley in the direction of the park's rear gate.

Alfred sobbed. Jack stood up again.

"You did good," he said. "I guess we ought to tell the police again, and the brewery security guard, and the circulation people at the newspaper. You want to call the police this time?"

Alfred put the back of his hand over his mouth and squinted against stinging tears.

"Alfred?"

"I'm . . . I'm okay."

"It doesn't do any good to call the police anyway."

Alfred slowly untied his balloons from the fence, wondering why they had been spared this time. "I should have looked closer at the people at the bus stop," he said.

"You couldn't have done anything," Jack said, picking up the handle of his wagon. "Get me to the corner?"

As they walked, Alfred holding Jack's free arm above the elbow in one hand and his balloon strings in the other, Jack said, "I can't afford this much longer. The newspaper has another spot for me, down by First National. I don't much like the noise down there, and I'd miss the park . . . and you. But ever since those guys started—what's this, the fourth time?"

Alfred stopped and turned Jack's arm loose. "I'll call the police. Maybe I could talk to Mike over in the park about patrolling over this way evenings."

Jack shook his head. "The police are too busy to worry about a couple of oldtimers like us, and Mike's never sober this late in the day. At least those young punks aren't getting rich from what they steal from us. Sooner or later they'll decide we're not worth the bother."

That made sense to Alfred, who would not have thought of it. "I don't want you to move away," he said, taking Jack's arm and resuming their walk toward the busy street.

"And I don't want to move," Jack said. "But I got bills, and so do you. Maybe you ought to think about moving to a safer place, too. I could maybe say something at the paper, get you a corner close to First National."

They stepped out of the alley onto the sidewalk. A breeze whistled against them, thumping Alfred's balloons against one another. Jack pulled the white cane out of his wagon.

Cars had their headlights on now, and shops along the sidewalk glowed with neon colors. Alfred guided Jack to the front wall of the brewery so that he could walk in the direction of the shops between it and the next corner. There was no one else on the sidewalk.

"Maybe I can hustle a few papers on the way home," Jack said, as always.

Alfred, his eyes burning, watched until Jack reached the lonely corner that seemed so far away.

When a person has spent as much of his life as he can remember in a huge city park—planting trees, mowing grass, tending shrubbery and ponds and paddleboats and tame ducks, selling balloons after the city declared him too old to do the other things—he does not for a moment consider working somewhere else. Yet working at the park without ending each day with Jack was nearly as unthinkable. Alfred pondered these things as he sat on a bench by one of the park's small ponds, watching the big stonework fountain that would have been on if it had been warmer. He had his balloon strings in one hand and his chin in the other and probably would not have noticed the well-dressed man standing next to the bench if Mr. Richardson hadn't spoken.

"You look sad, Alfred." In his navy blue suit and striped blue tie and grey hair as neat as a statue's, Mr. Richardson would have looked just right in one of those groups of government people they so often showed on the news.

"It's not important," Alfred said, not wanting to cry in front of this obviously important person.

"It must be; you look like you lost a friend."

Alfred couldn't help himself after that. While pigeons frolicked nearby and wind rattled his balloons, Alfred told Mr. Richardson everything about the young bullies and about Jack's decision to work somewhere else if it happened again.

"What about the police?" Mr. Richardson asked.

"They're too busy to worry about a couple of oldtimers like us."

Mr. Richardson joined Alfred on the bench, shook his head, and crossed his arms. "It's not fair," he said.

Alfred wondered what Jack would have said to break the silence that followed, but Mr. Richardson did it for him.

"I have an idea. I've been looking for someone to help with an important, secret operation. You'd be a good man for the job. And I know that, if you agreed to help, people would see to it that you weren't bothered any more by those bullies."

"Like a government operation?" Alfred asked.

"I really can't say. Nobody knows any more than he has to. But I can guarantee you the protection I mentioned, and you'd make some money, too."

"I'll do anything to keep those guys from bothering me and Jack."

Mr. Richardson leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees. "What you'd need to do is make a telephone call at five o'clock each day—say right before you go visit your friend by the brewery."

"There's a pay phone on the far side of the paddleboat lagoon. I go by it on my way to the back gate."

Mr. Richardson pulled a pen and notepad from his shirt pocket, wrote something, and ripped off the page. "Here's the number. When you call, have a pencil and small piece of paper with you. What you do is ask the man who answers the phone if he wants to buy a balloon. If he says no you just hang up and call again the same time next day. If he says yes, get ready to write. He'll give you four or five words to write down. You'll know the words, but together they won't make any sense to you. That's okay. Just make sure you get the words right."

"I get it," Alfred said. "It's a code."

Mr. Richardson smiled. "Alfred, you're a card. I knew I had the right man for the job. Do you understand what you need to do so far?"

"Sometimes I don't spell things right."

Mr. Richardson scratched his chin. "If you get a word you don't know, just ask the man on the phone to spell it for you. When do you blow up your balloons?"

"In my room at night. I even have a spare tank of gas."

"Excellent. You can carry your telephone message home the night you get it and slide it into one of the balloons you fill up the same night. The next day, someone will come up to you in the park and ask for a 'telephone balloon' and offer you a twenty dollar bill. Just give that person the balloon with the message in it, take the

twenty, and keep the change. Two things to remember: Make sure you don't sell the balloon with the message in it to anybody except the person that asks for a telephone balloon, and don't let anybody know what you're doing. Do you have any questions about anything?"

Alfred could not imagine not returning change for a twenty dollar bill . . . or having that much change in the first place. "That's an awful lot of money," he said.

"It's an important operation," said Mr. Richardson, smiling and patting Alfred on the knee. "Can you start next Monday?"

Those words—important operation—rang like golden chimes in Alfred's ears. "I can start any time," he said. "Don't worry; I'll remember everything."

As Mr. Richardson walked away, Alfred wondered what it meant to be "a card." He decided it must be something very good.

The system worked just as Mr. Richardson had described it. Alfred even knew how to spell most of the words, which the man on the telephone gave him in groups such as ONE ECHO TIGER-SHARK FIVE BINGO and PANTHER FOUR FIVE CHECKERS. Once, Alfred asked the man on the telephone how he was doing.

"Let's stick to business," the man snapped. Alfred never tried to make conversation after that.

The people who bought the telephone balloons seemed to want to stick to business, too. It was a different person each time. Most of them dressed like business people: the men in suits and ties and overcoats; the women in grey or brown suits. They looked like the people who normally rushed through the park mornings and evenings on their way to and from jobs in skyscrapers. They never spent much time buying their telephone balloons, and Alfred said nothing to slow them down. After his unsuccessful conversation with the man on the telephone, Alfred had decided that this was the way things worked in an important operation.

It was the easiest winter he could remember. It snowed heavily only twice. With his telephone balloon earnings Alfred bought canned soup to warm on the hot plate in his room. He even had enough money to drop a quarter into a Salvation Army cup at Christmas. He almost kept up with the rent.

Best of all, Alfred spent more time than before with Jack, who only once mentioned the young bullies who had threatened to spoil everything when winter began.

"Like I told you," Jack said one evening when everything was

soggy with melting snow, "those guys figured out they weren't going to make any decent money from the likes of you and me. They must have moved on."

Alfred never mentioned the telephone balloon business. It wasn't just because Mr. Richardson had warned him not to. Jack might have pointed out something about the arrangement to dislike, and if there was something wrong with it, Alfred didn't want to know. It seemed backwards—Alfred's knowing something that Jack did not. But that was just how things had to be.

The colder it became, the more indignant Jack grew about the police department's problems with the drug investigation. One sunny but frigid day in February, when Alfred had finished reading the day's story about the investigation and was tucking his mittened hands back under his arms to try to get the feeling back, Jack rubbed his thighs and said, "It must really be a failure if even the newspaper calls it that."

"They did call it that," Alfred said.

"But they usually go out of their blessed way to make it sound like something's happening when it's not."

"How come?"

Jack chewed on his lip, then said, "It's a long story. Just look at the situation: The cops know where the drugs are, but by the time they get there the operation vanishes. Like the story said, the dopers must have some fancy kind of communications."

It seemed awfully complicated to Alfred. "But why didn't the newspaper call it a failure when they figured out it was one?"

Jack sighed. "Sometimes a situation can look like something it isn't, and folks will keep it that way if they're making money from it."

Now Alfred was more confused than ever. "Oh," he said.

"Say, Alfred, why haven't I heard you say anything about the food at Salvation Army yet?"

There went Jack again, always noticing things. "I'm not eating there now," Alfred said. "It's a matter of principle."

A grin parted the wrinkles on Jack's face. "Finally making some money, are you?"

It was as though he could read minds or something. "Aw, Jack," said Alfred, "you're a card."

By the time spring came the second and third buttons on Alfred's green sweater had popped off. But it didn't matter. He had bought a woolly, warm coat that was so comfortable he almost hated to

think that soon it would be too warm to wear it. About that time he started having trouble seeing the words in the newspaper stories he read to Jack. So he went to the drugstore and bought a pair of reading glasses with blue frames and a sticker that said "Made in Hong Kong" in the corner of one lens. Walking around the park in his new woolly coat and glasses, Alfred wondered if it was a sin to be that happy and what might happen to him if it was.

At last, the newspaper ran an extra-big headline on the front page declaring that there had been a breakthrough in the drug investigation.

Jack grinned and slapped his thighs as Alfred read how the city prosecutor's office had infiltrated a group of what the newspaper called "lower-level drop men." By a series of coincidences, the investigators had been led finally to an "upper-level" dealer named Giles Frederickson. The state had now indicted Mr. Frederickson, who said he was a real estate developer and denied the charges, saying, "They can't prove a thing."

"That's what they always say," said Jack. "Killing's too good for him and everybody associated with him."

"There's more," said Alfred, turning the page to where the story continued. He began to read.

"Frederickson was free on one hundred thousand dollars bond, with a hearing scheduled March twenty . . . There's a picture of him—"

Alfred chilled. The man in the picture was trying to hide his face, but there could be no mistake: the dark suit and grey hair that looked like a statue's—it was Mr. Richardson.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack. "The guy got three heads or something?"

Alfred had to clear his throat. "Just sort of normal looking."

"That doesn't mean much to me. Finish the story."

Alfred stammered through the six or seven remaining paragraphs and left Jack as soon as he could. That night he didn't sleep.

The old light bulb hung by a frayed cord over the Formica-top table in Alfred's room. A cake of dust made it burn yellow. It should have burned out long ago.

Beneath the light bulb on the table were boxes of balloons, rolls of quarters, pencils, and little squares of paper cut from some hotel stationery he had found in the park long ago and saved. Next to the table sat the helium tanks.

Alfred stared at the telephone balloon message he had received

that afternoon, the day after Mr. Richardson's picture had appeared in the paper.

TIGERSHARK THREE CHARITY BROWN.

"I got a message from Mr. Richardson," the man on the telephone had said before reading the words to Alfred. "No matter what you might have heard, it's business as usual."

Now Alfred looked around the room that had been his home for as long as he could remember. To his left, outside the circle of yellow light, were his bed and little television. To his right were the sink, pantry, refrigerator, and counter where he kept his hot plate. It was all so familiar, yet he felt like an intruder. Somehow, Mr. Richardson's "important operation" was putting drugs in the hands of kids. When Jack had said killing was too good for Giles Frederickson—or Mr. Richardson—Alfred had wondered what could be worse. Now he knew.

TIGERSHARK THREE CHARITY BROWN.

Alfred didn't know what the words meant, but he knew the words they used. He took a blank square of paper and wrote upon it: **TIGERSHARK FOUR CHARITY RED.**

He put that message inside one of the balloons and tore up the original.

Jack slapped his thighs and laughed. It was the end of a sunny, warm spring day.

"So they finally started rounding up those low-life dopers," he said. "That's the best news I've heard since they indicted that Frederickson guy three weeks ago. Read that last part again."

Alfred glanced up the alley at the bus stop, where there was still a big crowd.

"We have to go after that," he said. He cleared his throat and began to read.

"Police said they learned from informants that deliveries of cocaine and heroin began about three weeks ago to be made at wrong locations, and apparently, at wrong times.

"They were able to trace complaints about missed deliveries to what proved to be regular dropoff points and to stake out the locations, resulting in the first arrests.

"Police believe the missed drug deliveries followed breakdowns in what they have presumed to be an elaborate communications network, which had baffled them for months. They still don't know how the network operated or what caused its failure."

Jack pounded his thighs with his fists. "I wish I could see those

crooks showing up at the wrong place, not getting the junk they need to ruin people's lives with."

"We really ought to go," said Alfred. He set the newspaper on the leftover stack in the wagon next to Jack, stood, and untied his eight unsold balloons from the park fence. "I'll walk you to the street."

Jack stood and mumbled something about Alfred's having been acting strangely lately. When they reached the busy street Alfred saw the late bus just two blocks away. Only a few cars had their headlights on. The crowd at the bus stop seemed not to notice Alfred and Jack.

"I'll get your cigar box," Alfred said. Into the tattered box he slipped nine twenty-dollar bills—his telephone balloon earnings for three weeks.

"I was thinking about spending some time down at Salvation Army," Alfred said. "You could maybe come down . . ."

"Me? Alfred, it's a matter of principle." Jack stood still for a moment, as though he were trying to listen to what Alfred was thinking. Finally, he said, "Business is lousy for me, too. The brewery let some of the day shift go. I was thinking of setting up down by First National."

Alfred handed Jack the cigar box. "I'll come by if I get the chance. Hold on tight to this."

The bus squeaked to a stop, its headlights coming on.

"We sure busted up that drug ring, didn't we?" Jack asked, smiling, reaching for his cane.

"We sure did," Alfred said.

Jack turned and tapped his way past the bus as brewery workers climbed aboard. Alfred turned back into the alley, which was now dark and empty and still. He thought of cocaine and heroin and kids and wondered what any of them looked like. When he was in front of the place where Jack's newsstand used to be he heard the bus hiss, roar, and drive away. And he heard footsteps.

"Why save these?" he asked out loud, looking up at his balloons. They climbed quickly, silhouettes against the evening sky, flying apart in pairs. They were free. Alfred was glad for that.

He watched the balloons as the gravelly footsteps got closer and closer. He felt glad and frightened and strangely confident that, for the first time since he could remember, he knew exactly what was happening in the alley by the park . . . and what would happen next.

FICTION

The Adventure of the Mnemonic Norwegian

by Robert W. Hahn

Illustration by Judy Mitchell



Sherlock Holmes was standing at the window, hands clasped behind his back, staring out at the rain-drenched street as I descended for breakfast. His return "Good morning" was curt and barely audible, and I knew that the long period of inactivity was having its usual effect on him. His only recent investigation was the affair of Miss Elspeth Hodder's inexplicable conduct at the Albert Hall charity concert.

I picked up the morning paper which, by its crumpled condition, I knew Holmes had recently discarded. The first item that met my eye read:

STRANGE DEATH AT FOREIGN OFFICE
CLERK FOUND DEAD IN LOCKED ROOM

Grateful acknowledgment to Dame Jean Conan Doyle for permission to use the characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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"Holmes," I exclaimed, "have you read the story about the Foreign Office?"

"Yes, Watson, I have," said he wearily, turning and seating himself at the table as Mrs. Hudson appeared with my breakfast tray.

"No, you go right ahead, Watson," in response to my raised eyebrows. "I breakfasted quite early this morning . . . with Mycroft, in fact."

"No doubt in connection with the Foreign Office affair."

"Yes, it is quite a puzzler . . . for the authorities."

"Well, who was the chap?" I asked. "The newspaper only mentioned that he was an undersecretary to Lord Holdhurst and a Norwegian."

My friend knocked the ashes from his pipe and began to refill it.

"The man is almost more interesting than the crime," he said between puffs. "You will recall that your friend Percy Phelps went to the continent to further his recovery from the harrowing experience you published as 'The Naval Treaty.' While in Switzerland he met this young Norwegian, also on vacation, whom he grew to like very much and who was possessed, apparently, of a most remarkable memory. In addition, he was well-versed in deciphering cryptograms, and Percy recommended him to his uncle, who took him on as an undersecretary.

"Somehow the young man came into possession of a secret document, a coded message from one of the unfriendly powers to another. Although it was a devilishly clever code that had defeated the attempts of all the experts, he managed to break it and clarify the message. But showing great perspicacity for one so young, he refused to reveal the secret of the code."

"Why would he do such a thing?" I inquired.

"He felt, and quite correctly, that while the secret of the code was in his head rather than on paper, he was a most valuable commodity to the Foreign Office. He persuaded them to assign him a private office where he could, when not deciphering messages, pursue his studies into the roots of the Chaldean language, a study to which I devoted many hours myself, as you will recall.

"All was going quite well until about midnight last night when a guard noticed a light under the door to the young man's office. This was most unusual, since while he often worked after-hours on his studies, he invariably left by eight o'clock.

"Repeated efforts to rouse him were fruitless, and after almost

an hour the door was broken down and they found the young man dead on the floor."

"Without a mark on him," I broke in. "The paper was quite certain about that."

"Yes," said Holmes, "Mycroft confirmed that. No bullet or knife wound, no trace of poison. And the man was in excellent health. Absolutely no problem with his heart."

"According to the reports," said I, "the door was securely locked and bolted from the inside, and there was but one window much too small for anyone to have crawled through."

"And," added Holmes, "no strangers were seen entering or leaving the building after closing time."

I stood up. "Well, when do you plan to go to the Foreign Office? Will you want me to accompany you?"

"No need for that, Watson. It is a relatively simple matter."

"Simple!" I cried. "I should say it's deucedly complicated. To begin with, Mycroft came to consult with you. Surely he must suspect foul play."

"He most certainly does. And with good cause, I would say."

"Then there is the matter of the locked room. Who, if anyone, entered . . . and how did he leave? That is most puzzling in itself."

"It does present certain problems," smiled Holmes.

"And what about those unfriendly powers you mentioned? Is it not possible they learned that the code was broken, and would they not then attempt to do away with the man who held the secret?"

Holmes chuckled, "Watson, you are positively scintillating on this otherwise dreary day."

"Then why are you wasting time here?" I asked. "A dead man in a room no one could have entered. The victim was not stabbed, nor shot, nor . . . nor . . . strangled. No evidence of poison. Why, we don't even know how he was killed."

"Oh! but we do, old chap, we do," said Holmes in his most arch manner.

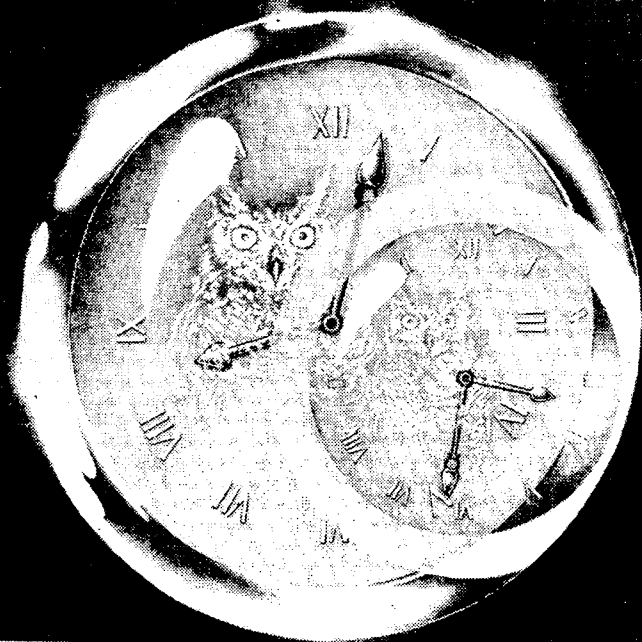
Somewhat nettled, I responded tartly, "You can say that without having visited the scene of the crime, or even viewing the body? All right, then . . . how did he die?"

"Elementary, my dear fellow," replied Holmes. "If you will but review and re-sort the facts you have enumerated, you will see that they allow for but one conclusion. The young man died of a code in the head."

FICTION

Timely Psychiatric Intervention

by Al and Mary Kuhfeld



“**N**o, no, it's not that he's gone right round the bend,” said Natterly. “He's mostly sort of like he's always been. Only more so.”

Dr. Bach nodded and tried to look understanding. The problem with these superheated brains, he thought, is that they don't really know what normal is any more. Why he'd agreed to be the house psychiatrist to

the inmates of a think tank he'd never know. That wasn't true, of course. The reason was money. After years of untenured teaching, he'd leaped at this offer like a hungry bass after a pickerel frog. “Tell me,” he said, “just what appears to be the problem?”

Natterly was Joe McCain's supervisor, a very tall, thin man with indoor skin. He shrugged. “Well, he's working

on something very—sensitive. And he's touchy about it, but he smiles a lot. And you know McCain, he never smiles."

Dr. Bach didn't know McCain, not very well. He remembered him as a sour-mouthed, taciturn little man with dark eyes that darted everywhere. Macbeth, about Act IV. Bach gave the psychiatrist's standard reply. "Go on."

"Oh, he's always been a little strange—" Natterly gave a nervous laugh and tucked his handkerchief deeper into his shirt pocket, his inevitable sign of distress. "Always thinking people are plotting to take credit for his work, or something. He types his own reports, you know. Won't allow a secretary near his notes. He's just as sure one of us would love to take a look at his pet project as he ever was, but now he smiles when he lets on he thinks so. And it's not a nice smile."

Though he thought that rather thin, Bach agreed to have McCain in for a talk. An appointment was set up for late the next afternoon—for all the jokes, a mad scientist is not a healthy thing to have in a high-tech research lab—and McCain proved himself prompt.

He strode in on the dot, glanced around the comfortable office, shied visibly at the stuffed owl on a shelf, and sat down.

He was in gray slacks, cream shirt, and green tweed sport coat, his going-home clothes. "All right, I'm here!" he announced, and studied Dr. Bach from under a massive dome of forehead with uncommonly keen blue eyes.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then McCain abruptly relaxed and said, "Please forgive me. I've always been a suspicious man, seeing conspiracies everywhere. When Natterly told me I was to come to see you, it threw me because he wasn't the least bit subtle about it. I'm used to subtleties; overt actions confuse me." He smiled, an honest smile, and that simple action transformed him into a charming elf.

"Natterly tells me you are being unusually close-mouthed about your latest project."

McCain's eyebrows raised. "I have to be! Good heavens, man, I've only reported a quarter of what I've discovered, and they've slapped a Top Secret label on that!"

"But as your supervisor, surely Natterly is on the list, however short, of those who need to know."

McCain's back curved a little, and his head pulled back into his shoulders. The elf was gone, replaced by a paranoid gnome. "He knows all he needs to know."

"Well, can you tell me about it?"

"You?"

"In order to perform my job, I've been given the highest possible clearances, and I am to be given access to anything I judge to be important to the care of my patients. And I never, ever speak of such matters outside the confines of this office."

"So I'm a patient, am I?" The look was becoming malignant.

"Everyone who works here is my patient," Dr. Bach said, keeping it light, waving his hand to indicate the depth and breadth of his load.

The malignancy retreated, a little. "So, what do you want to know?"

"First, what is it you're working on?"

"Time travel." He said it so off-handedly that it took a few seconds to sink in.

"Time travel?" Bach had been hearing rumors for months, but—

"Certainly. I've built a prototype machine and I've been doing some experiments, on rats, mostly." He looked up at Dr. Bach from under that forehead and smiled a mischievous elf-smile. "Oh, I'm aware of the paradoxes. The most serious one is proving anything has happened. For example, if I were to travel back to this morning and change this sport

coat for my navy blue blazer, then I would have walked in here wearing it and I'd never convince you I ever came in wearing the sport coat. See? I go back and make a change and since the moment then arrives in its new form, how does anyone know it's changed? Would even I remember? Very interesting."

"You're saying it's possible for you to do that? Go back and change something?"

"Of course. In fact, I plan on doing that first thing in the morning. I'm going to kill my father."

Dr. Bach gaped, then grinned. "But if you kill your father, then you would never be born. And if you are never born, then you don't invent a time machine. And if you don't invent a time machine then your father will live, so you will be born, so—"

McCain laughed. "Don't be an idiot! I intend to kill my father only after I am conceived. My father was a cruel, hard, unpleasant man, a drunk. We lived in the worst apartment in the worst part of town. He blamed me for the death of his wife—she died right after I was born—and he made my life hell. He's going to die, so I can have a better upbringing. And it'll look like an accident because I don't want an innocent

person accused of it. And, anyway, I think it would be a small improvement to be the orphan child of a murdered man.

"It's likely my grandfather will raise me: he had a farm, and that is a far healthier environment for a child than a slum." Again the keen glance. "You think I don't know what I am? You think you're the first psychiatrist who has tried to help? Bah! I know what would help, and I'm going to go do it!"

This was an entirely new approach to an old problem, and Dr. Bach said he would be interested in seeing the result. McCain promised to come in again the next day.

He strode in on the dot, glanced around the comfortable office, shied visibly at the stuffed owl on a shelf, and sat down. He was in gray slacks, blue shirt, and navy blue blazer, his going-home clothes. "All right, I'm here!" he announced, and studied Dr. Bach from under a massive dome of forehead with uncommonly keen blue eyes.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then McCain abruptly relaxed and said, "Please forgive me, I've always been a suspicious man, seeing conspiracies everywhere. When Natterly told me I was to come to see you, it threw me because he wasn't the least bit subtle about it. I'm

used to subtleties; overt actions confuse me." If he'd smiled, Dr. Bach might have found him more human.

"Natterly tells me you are being unusually close-mouthed about your latest project," said Dr. Bach. "May I ask what it is you're working on? It's all right to tell me; I have the highest possible clearances, and I never talk shop with anyone."

"Time travel." He said it so off-handedly that it took a few seconds to sink in.

"Time travel?"

"Certainly. I've built a prototype machine and I've been doing some experiments." He looked up at Dr. Bach from under that forehead. "Oh, I'm aware of the paradoxes, and that the most serious one is proving anything has happened. But I plan on trying it anyway, first thing in the morning. I'm going to kill my grandfather. He raised me when my father died in a car accident shortly after the death of my mother."

Dr. Bach gaped, then grinned. "But if you kill your grandfather, then your father would never be born, and then you would never be conceived. And if there's no you, then there's no time machine. And if you don't invent a time machine, then your grandfather will live, so you will be born, so—"

"Don't be an idiot!" McCain barked. "I intend to kill my grandfather only after my father is conceived. The death of my parents was a terrible blow to my development. If they had lived, I'd have grown up in the city, with its libraries and with other children to play with. My grandfather was a cruel, hard, unpleasant man, suspicious and miserly. He kept me strictly confined to that shambles he called a farm. My environment was so deprived that I'm sure that's the reason I grew up to be so—strange." Again the keen glance. "You think I don't know what I am? You think you're the first psychiatrist who has tried to help? Bah! I know what would help, and I'm going to go do it!"

He promised to come see Dr. Bach the next day and let him know what had happened.

He strode in on the dot, glanced around the comfortable office, shied visibly at the stuffed owl on a shelf, and sat down. He was in dark brown slacks, cream shirt, and tan sport coat, his going-home clothes. "All right, I'm here!" he announced, studying Dr. Bach from under a massive dome of forehead with uncommonly keen blue eyes.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then McCain abruptly relaxed and said, "Forgive me.

I've always been a suspicious man, seeing conspiracies everywhere. I don't know how Natterly is going to run a proper conspiracy, coming right out and telling me to visit you; and he'd better hope I don't figure it out. Maybe he's realized overt actions confuse me."

"Natterly tells me you're being unusually close-mouthed about your latest project. May I ask what you are working on?"

"Time travel."

"Time travel?"

"Certainly. I've built a prototype machine and I've been doing some experiments, on rats, mostly." He scowled up at Dr. Bach from under that forehead. "Oh, I'm aware of the paradoxes, but I plan on trying it first thing in the morning anyway. I'm going to kill my uncle. As my only living relative, he raised me. It would have been better if he had never been born. He was a cruel, hard, unpleasant man, suspicious and miserly. He put me to work at an early age and never let me keep a dime of what I earned. Paper routes, lawn mowing, snow shoveling, then soda jerking. I worked my way through high school and worked in college to buy clothes and pay rent—scholarships don't cover everything, you know. I never learned to play, never learned

how to establish a relationship with anyone. That's a pity: a man of my intelligence should have children, pass along those genes. So I'm going to go back and kill him."

Dr. Bach felt a vague unease at the thought of a whole family of little McCains. He extracted a promise from the scientist that he come in again the next day and let him know what had happened.

"It was that terrible orphanage I was raised in!" he shouted. "No normal loving relationship with my own people. They all started dying right about the time I was born. It was almost as if there were some kind of plot to destroy me!"

"Settle down," Dr. Bach said soothingly, reaching for the secret button under the edge of his desk. But McCain made a serious effort to calm himself, and Bach brought his hand back to the desk's shining surface. Possibly McCain was right: being raised by blood relatives, even less-than-perfect ones, might have made an enormous difference to this man. Meanwhile, better distract him with a less-explosive subject. "Could we explore for a moment your obvious reaction to my stuffed owl?"

"Humph!" snorted McCain.

"I'm allergic to feathers."

Disappointed, Dr. Bach tried another subject. "Will you tell me what project it is you're working on? I assure you I have the highest clearances, and I never talk shop."

"I don't care what your clearance is, I won't tell you about it. I won't tell anyone about it until I've tried it out and discover that it works."

"When do you think that might be?"

"I don't know. But it's just a matter of time." A malignant smile flickered briefly.

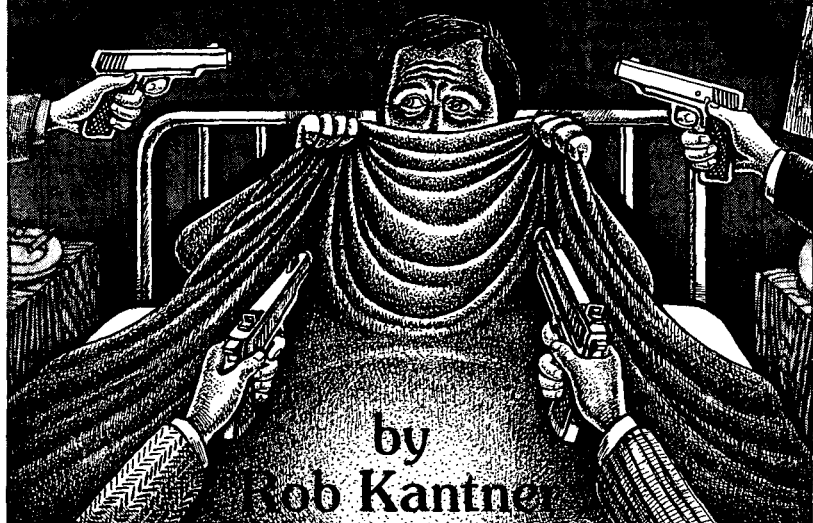
"Can't you give me a better estimate than that? I assure you, this may be very pertinent."

"I don't care how pertinent you think it is, I don't think it's pertinent at all, and I won't tell you." There was an uncomfortable, thought-filled silence, then McCain said, almost to himself, "A man with your clearances should have other ways of finding out what I'm working on."

That was exactly what Dr. Bach was thinking, and his face betrayed him.

"I'll tell you what," said McCain, the smile now very ugly indeed. "I'm going to try out my machine first thing tomorrow morning. If it works, you'll be the first to know."

The Man Who Called from Tomorrow



by
Rob Kantner

“**N**ow, Mr. Perkins,” Mrs. Weingarten said ponderously, “I must impress upon you how distressing this latest incident of non-sufficient funds is.”

I glared at the phone receiver, then put it back to my ear. “Now, Mrs. Weingarten. I’ve been with your bank damn near fifteen years, and this is

only about the third time I’ve overdrawn. So lighten up. It isn’t like Guatemala has just defaulted on its loans or anything.”

“This is no laughing matter, Mr. Perkins.”

“It wasn’t even my fault, really. A client paid me by check, and it did the old bounce-a-roo. Kinda had a trickle-down

effect on my own checks. Domino theory, sort of."

"A *client*?" she asked, disbelief oozing from the word.

"Yeah, I'm a private detective."

"Is that a fact? Then I suggest that you go and detect yourself two hundred eighty-three dollars and ninety-two cents, sometime in the immediate future. At *least* bring your balance up to zero, Mr. Perkins, won't you?"

"No problem." I hung up the phone with a slam of plastic and stomped down the silent hall of my apartment to the bedroom. As I changed clothes, my irrational hatred of banks changed into a very rational hatred for Freddie Flynn. The little weasel-face had hung a big fat hunk of bad paper on me and probably was even now giggling into his whisky rocks in one of the scummy east side bars he frequents. Well, I'd find him, and I'd get my five bills from him, and I'd teach him a lesson. Take *that* to the bank, Mrs. Weingarten.

I was, figuratively speaking, dressed to kill and headed for the door when the phone rang. I grabbed it on the fly. "Detectives!"

No voice, just the ssssss of long distance for ten seconds. Then a male voice: "Gail there?"

"Wrong number, pal."

"Who is this?" came the faint voice.

"What matters is I'm not Gail. 'Bye."

"Wait a minute!" Though in a rush, I did. "Is this—" he read off a number.

"Was the last time I checked."

"Five-one-three area code?"

"Nope. This is *three*-one-three, *Dee*-troit, Michigan, go Tigers! and all that. What you want is Cincinnati, which is down in Ohio where it belongs."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry I bothered you."

"No problem, we all get butterfingered every now and then." I hung up and blew out of there, plotting a trajectory with Freddie Flynn as ground zero.

By eight thirty I was back home, mission accomplished. Flynn, whom I located as predicted holding forth in a dive on Kercheval, had used all of the oily stratagems of the practiced deadbeat in his attempts to deter me. Maybe I didn't owe you the money anyway, Perkins. Then, my bank screwed up, I'll straighten it out and call you next week. Then, gee whiz, Ben, I'm tapped out, just today I dropped two large on a half-lame filly at DRC. Then, have a heart, bro, my little girl's in Wayne Hospital, costing me seven fifty a day. I reasoned

with him without having to get too strenuous about it, and returned home with my money, every nickel of it, in mostly small bills that looked like they'd seen duty as cow cud. But it was good United States legal tender and would spend just fine, thank you. Persuasive Perkins, they call me.

I'd just finished sorting, counting, and flattening out the bills when the phone rang. I snatched it up. "Perkins."

The male voice, fuzzy with the distance, sounded familiar. "Are you the man I talked to before?"

"Yeah, but this still isn't Cincinnati, sorry."

"You said you're a detective."

"Huh?"

"When I called before. You said 'detectives' when you answered the phone."

I leaned back and lighted a short cork-tipped cigar. "I get in these puckish moods. Sometimes I answer with 'Joe's Mule Barn' or 'Your dime, start talking' or stuff like that."

"Are you a policeman?"

"Private detective," I answered, puffing smoke, wondering what the hell was going on here.

"Well, uh, I want to hire you."

"Is that so."

As his words rushed on in a torrent, a mental image of him formed in my mind. Male, ob-

viously. American, accentless, possibly midwestern but lacking the nasal sounds common to upper midwesterners. Educated, professional. Anxious, under stress, and very, very far away.

He said, "That number I was calling in Cincinnati, it's my wife Gail. When I called with the right area code, I found out the number belongs to someone else now, who'd never heard of Gail. I don't know where she is and I've got to find her."

"Wait a minute, hold it," I said. I reached behind into the writing-table drawer and pulled out a pad and a pen. "There's some essential facts missing here."

"Like what?"

"Like your name, for starters."

"Murray. Paul Murray."

"'Kay." I wrote it down. "Where are ya?"

A pause. "Apra Harbor, Guam."

"Say what?" He repeated it. "Guam?" I echoed. "Isn't that in the Pacific Ocean somewhere?"

"Close enough."

Hell of a good connection, I thought; I've had worse calling my sister Libby in Ann Arbor, which makes sense when you think about it. "Wow," I said. "Like what time is it there?"

"Ten thirty A.M., if it matters."

"Yeah?" I checked my watch. "It's eight thirty P.M. here."

"It's, uh, Tuesday there, too, right? Tuesday night. Here it's Wednesday morning."

"That's tomorrow," I observed.

"Uh-huh. Listen, I'm serious, I want to hire you. I want you to go to Cincinnati and find my wife."

I doodled with my pen. "Well, I mean, how come? Why don't you know where she is?"

A long pause. "Okay, I'll level with you," he said, which, I couldn't help thinking, is the way a client usually prefaces a pack of lies. "I left. I ran out on her eight years ago. I can't help it, I'm a wandering kind of guy, I keep hitting the road—"

"Long road to Guam."

"Tell me about it," he said soberly. "But—I—I want her back. I miss her." Pause. "I love her. I'll beg for her forgiveness. I'll do anything—"

"So catch a plane and come back here and do it."

"No. I don't want to make the trip till I talk to her. So I want you to find her and tell her about me and bring her to your place. Say, uh, seventy-two hours from now, on the nose, I'll call you again. You have Gail there and I'll talk to her and we'll see what happens."

I rolled my eyes, took a last hot toke off my cigar, and

mashed it out in the ashtray on my kitchen table. What the hell, it was irregular, but, I told myself, every case doesn't have to be a dead boring snore. "Where should I start looking?"

He gave me an address in Montgomery, a Cincinnati suburb. I wrote it down. "One more thing," he said. "She might be, uh, skeptical. So to prove it's really me I want you to give her this exact phrase: 'Let's boogie tonight.'"

I snorted and grinned and wrote that down, too. "Okay," I said finally, "but first there are certain financial arrangements. I get two fifty a day plus expenses. *American*," I added.

"Chicken feed," Murray said. "Given the distance, it probably would make you happier if you got paid in advance. Give me your bank account information, I'll wire the cash into there."

While I found the whole situation unlikely as hell, I didn't see any risk in giving him the poop. I dug out my checkbook and read off the essentials.

"Okay," he said, "it'll be there in twelve hours, max."

"I'll be waiting," I answered.

"Get it done for me," he said, and hung up.

Next morning, nine-oh-three sharp, the phone rang. It was Mrs. Weingarten at the bank. Her

voice had a respectful tone in it that I'd never heard before. "I wish to confirm the receipt of the inter-bank funds transfer," she said.

I wasn't fast on the uptake. "Huh?"

"The wire transfer," she said patiently. "We've credited it to your account."

I remembered now. Though stupefied, I managed to put the right superior tone in my voice. "About time."

"Your balance," she went on hastily, "excluding any unrepresented debits, is now two thousand two hundred sixteen dollars and eight cents."

Two point two gee, I thought. Less the negative balance, that meant Mr. Paul Murray had sent two and a half large. Ten days' pay for two days' work.

"Very well," I said.

"We appreciate your patronage, Mr. Perkins," Mrs. Weingarten said, and hung up.

I hung up my phone and sat down slowly at the kitchen table. I sat there for what seemed like a very long time, thinking about Guam and a wandering husband and a misdialed number. It was all very real now, and I had cold hard cash in my account to prove it. Time to go to work.

I fetched the book and picked up the phone and called Delta Airlines to arrange an imme-

diately flight to Cincinnati.

The engraving on the brass door knocker said BELTZMANN. I rapped it. After a moment the door swung back and a short, voluptuous, permed redhead dressed in jeans and a blue open-necked shirt smiled expectantly at me. "Gail Beltzmann?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Gail Murray Beltzmann?"

"I was married before, but—" Her smile vanished. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Ben Perkins from Detroit. I represent Mr. Paul Murray, who hired me to locate you."

"Paul."

"Yes, ma'am. We need to talk. Can I come in?"

She backed up a half-step. "Not here," she said, voice low, bright blue eyes intent on me. "Not now." She gripped the door harder. "Paul!" she whispered.

"So where and when? I'm not from around here, I'm on a tight schedule—"

"One hour, all right?" Voice soft and deadly intent. "Um, the Ground Round on Beechmont, in the bar."

"Beechmont, the main drag just south—"

"One hour," she repeated, and swung the door shut.

I wheeled the rented Ford LTD up Denallen Drive and re-

flected with some smugness that locating Gail Murray hadn't been so tough. I'd gone to the address in Montgomery that Paul Murray had given me, to be informed that the current owners had purchased the place five years before. I went to the realtors, laid a first-class charm job on the agent who handled the transaction, and elicited the information that the previous owner, Gail Murray, had sold the house on a land contract, the monthly payments for which were being sent to an address on Denallen Drive in Anderson Township, some ten miles south of Montgomery near the Ohio River. Went down there, knocked on the door, and found the woman, just like that. Now all I had to do was meet her at the Ground Round and pass on the message and try to convince her to come to Detroit with me to receive the expected phone call from her errant ex-husband.

A hitch-free investigation, I thought.

If you didn't count the tail I'd picked up.

The guy, whoever he was, wasn't all that smooth. Vaguely groping my way toward Beechmont Avenue, I took Denallen to Holiday Hills Drive to Eight Mile Road, and accidentally took a right instead of a left. A charcoal gray Buick Ri-

viera did the same. A quarter mile later, at the Clough Pike intersection, I realized my mistake and U-turned on a Convenient Food Store parking lot to go the other way on Eight Mile toward Beechmont. The Riviera did exactly likewise, which tends to make guys in my line of work uneasy.

I drove on, maintaining the speed limit, keeping an eye on the Riviera in the rear-view. The solo occupant breezed along five car lengths behind me. I reached Beechmont on yellow and punched the gas to beat the light, interested to observe the Riviera do the same, roaring up almost to my bumper to do so. He fell back some as we proceeded out of the built-up area and into an undeveloped district of steep hills, thick forests, and tight curves. I increased speed as we crossed the I-275 overpass, and the Riviera laid on additional gas to match me.

I felt peevisish. Things had gone so well here in Cincinnati, I didn't want them screwed up by some half-assed tail. I continued at the best speed I could manage as the terrain became increasingly rugged, and then, as I headed up the steepest hill yet, found my chance.

I floored the accelerator, crested the hill at top speed, then geared down and mashed the brakes and went into a

shrieking, smoking, controlled spin on the coarse blacktop. Who cares, the car was rented. I ended up at a shuddering standstill with a queasy stomach, facing back the way I'd come, straddling the center line. The Riviera charged over the hill toward me, jinked to my left but not quite enough, and whacked my front fender and slid sideways into a weedy ditch.

Now I was crossways in the road. I opened the door and got out. The Riviera was wedged driver's-side doormost against the mud and its driver, a big beefy short-haired guy, restarted the engine, put the car into gear, and started to pull out. He'd made two feet in the damp berm when I reached his car and tipped the door open. "Not so fast, fella."

He had short bristly hair, tiny eyes set deep in a face composed of jowls and a snout, and wore an ill-fitting business suit. He glared at me, eyes two pinpricks of dark light. "Back away from me. I'm in a hurry."

Lunging, I gave him an open-palmed punch in the side of his face that knocked him longways on the bench seat. I switched off the Riviera ignition and stepped back, tossing the keys in my hand. The man, shaking his head and panting, groped back to a sitting position behind the wheel. "You'll wish

you hadn't done that," he muttered.

I grinned and leaned on the open door. "Why're you following me?"

As he glared up at me, I saw the sheen of blood on his lower lip. Must have bitten himself when I hit him. "I wasn't following you."

"Sure you were, let's not get silly about this. The question is *why*."

He rubbed his cheek where I hit him, eyes reflective. "It's none of your business."

I sighed and gestured with my fingers. "Okay, come on. Let's have some I.D."

His face went tired. He nodded, reached a hand under the lapel of his suit jacket, and came out with one of those little baby automatics, probably a Smith & Wesson Model 61, barely four inches by three inches and employing a .22 long rifle slug that can kill you very dead. His small eyes had a satisfied sparkle. "This good enough I.D. for you?"

I stepped back from the door, very slowly. "Oh yeah, perfectly fine."

He gestured with his lethal peashooter. "Gimme the keys."

I cleared my throat. "Here's how we'll work this. I'll back up to my car and drop your keys on the road when I get there."

He stared levelly at me for a

long moment, then murmured, "Let's do it."

He kept his weapon trained on me as I backed up on the rough macadam. When I reached the open door of my LTD, I carefully lowered myself into the seat, my left hand with his keys in it in plain sight. With my right hand I fired up the LTD and banged the column shift down. As I floored the gas, I gave his keys a hard, high lob over his car, going probably thirty feet into the dense overgrown thicket. The door almost slammed on my arm as I crested the hill and was gone.

As I crossed back over I-275, I exhaled the breath that I felt like I'd been holding all week. Nice move, Perkins. Decent mix of violence, daring, and cunning. Except for one problem. Aside from the definite pro smell I sensed in him, I still had no idea who he was or why he was tailing me.

I slid into the far corner booth in the bar of the Ground Round, across from Gail Beltzmann. She still wore her jeans and open-necked blue shirt, and the afternoon light from the window illuminated her tightly permed red hair, a pleasant contrast to her bright blue eyes. I sensed congenital playfulness in her, suppressed by an attack of almost terminal

suspicion. "So what's this about Paul?" she greeted, fingers playing idly with the wide-mouthed glass that seemed filled principally with fruit.

"Hey wait, lady, let's get some essentials took care of first." I flagged down the waitress, who organized me a beer, and I took a slug of that and lighted a cigar before beginning my story. I delivered it flatly and non-committally, aware of Gail's narrow-eyed disbelief. "What he told me was," I concluded, "he feels guilty about his wandering ways, and he wants you back. But he doesn't want to come back here from Guam till he knows where you stand."

She nodded slightly, eyes dead. "So I'm supposed to go to Detroit with you and wait for him to call."

"Tomorrow," I agreed, and took a belt of beer.

She took just the teeniest pull of her drink through the plastic straw and set the glass down. "Wanderlust," she said. "Oh yeah, that's Paul, all right. All those years we were married I could never count on him. That bastard. All those excuses. Days and weeks away with no explanation. Oh, he was a real *fine* husband. Now, eight whole years later without a single word, he wants me back. That's just *precious*."

I exhaled smoke and said,

"Hey, listen. I'm no marriage counselor, I'm just a paid messenger boy here. Your choice is either come back to Detroit with me and talk to him when he calls, or tell me to tell him to pound sand crossways where the sun don't shine. Makes not a whit of difference to me, kid."

Her eyes narrowed and her soft, inviting mouth hardened. "I've *remarried*. I had Paul declared *dead* over a year ago. Strikes me he ought to just stay that way." Her eyes bore in on me. "Matter of fact, how do I know you're on the level? I've never met you before. How do I know you really talked to Paul?"

I coughed, whacked excess ash off my cigar, and said, "Well, he gave me a phrase to give you. Said you'd understand. Phrase is: 'Let's boogie to-night.'"

Her bright blue eyes faded, became teary. "That's him. That's Paul," she sniffed. "Oh, Lord." Her throat bobbed and she used the back of her wrist to wipe her eyes.

I looked away respectfully and said, "So you want to come back with me?"

She dropped her hand from her eyes. "For *that* bastard? After all he's put me through? Hell, no." She picked up her drink and took a vicious pull from it.

"Okay, fine," I said, thinking what do I care.

She glared at me across the rim of her glass. "Not that Paul's all that unique. Sometimes I wonder if men are bastards in general, or did I just have a bad run of luck. My husband Ronnie's not good at much except growing beer wings. Can't even keep a job. If I hadn't gotten the Montgomery place from Paul's estate, we'd be living somewhere like Lower Price Hill now." She pursed her lips, then gnawed on her lower one, eyes going far away. "That's one thing I have to admit about Paul. He worked hard. Knew how to bring home the big money." Her voice coarsened at the end and she looked away from me, pressing her knuckles hard against her cheekbone.

After a long moment I ventured, "So do I book you a seat, or—"

"In a pig's eye!" she shot back. She leaned forward, eyes hot, nearly spilling her fruit. "Look, Perkins, quit trying to *sell* me, willya? I wouldn't cross the sidewalk to put out that bastard if he was on *fire*."

"Lady," I said, my voice a rattle, "I'm not trying to sell you the teeniest, weeniest little thing, believe thee me!" I looked around for the waitress, anxious to get the bill and pay it and get the hell out of there.

She was nowhere to be seen.

We sat in hard-eyed silence for several minutes. Gail speared several pieces of fruit with her cocktail straw and ate them. I mashed out my old cigar and lighted a new one. Then she asked quietly, "Did Paul give you *any* idea what he's been doing all these years?"

"Nary a word." The waitress hove into sight. I made scribbling motions in the air and she nodded and headed toward us.

"Mm," Gail said. She was chasing a piece of grapefruit without much success. "Could have been something awful. Maybe he was kidnapped, or . . . got amnesia, or . . . was badly injured. Something like that." She pouted and her eyes went shiny and a wet trail ran brightly down a freckled cheek. "What if something awful like that happened to him? Poor guy!"

I licked my lips and took two deep breaths, considering my reply carefully, then plunged. "There's one way to find out."

"*Oh, it's probably the same old garbage!*" Gail snarled, small fists clenched on the table. "Booze and broads—and parties—and—"

The waitress arrived then and not a minute too soon. I didn't even look at the bill, just shoved a ten into her hands, told her to keep the change, and got to my feet. "I'm outta here."

I said to Gail, and headed for the door.

She caught up with me on the sidewalk. "You may be a pretty decent detective, Perkins, but God-damn you're dense."

I spun to her and flung my hands in the air. "Gail, lemme clue ya. Sometimes in this work no amount of pay is enough. You follow?" She winced and suddenly looked very small and lost. I took a deep breath and cast my eyes upward and said, "All right, listen. I'm heading for the airport now, flying back tonight. You change your mind, you call me first for directions." I gave her the number.

"Don't hold your breath," she said, and spun and stalked away.

The crash woke me. I lurched upward in the unfamiliar bed as male voices boomed outside and something crashed against the door again. I scanned the early morning darkness with panicky eyes, then realized I wasn't at home at all, but at the Best Western motel near the Cincinnati airport—because all the Detroit flights had been booked up the evening before.

The door crashed again and flung around so hard that the inner knob buried itself in the drywall. Four guys barreled into my room, guys in suits, armed with heavy revolvers, led by my beady-eyed friend

from the Buick Riviera. He stopped halfway to the bed as his cohorts fanned out in the room and pointed a very impressive Colt Python at me. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Who?" I asked stupidly, pulling the sheet up around me.

Somebody hollered from the bathroom, "Not here, boss."

"Gail Murray," Beady-Eyes said to me, gesturing with his gun. "Where is she? Where'd she go?"

"Damn if I know," I said through sleep-numbered lips. "Home, I reckon."

The other guys finished their intent tour of the room. "No sign she's been here, boss," one of them said to Beady-Eyes.

He made a puff-cheeked sigh and holstered his weapon under his coat. "No, she's not at home," he muttered. He turned to one of his guys and said, "Airport, blanket it," and the man ran out.

When he looked back at me, I was ready. "You guys some kind of law?"

"What's it to you?"

"Yeah, you're law all right, that clumsy tail bit of yours yesterday confirms it." He didn't answer. "So," I went on, "you come busting in here and cause me great emotional distress, and if you got no warrant and there's no probable cause or something, I can go to the papers and the ACLU and folks

like that, and end up taking a big piece of change off you guys, not to mention the embarrassment and career problems y'all'd experience personally."

"We were impulsive. We slipped up. Many apologies."

"Not good enough. And you know it."

"National security," Beady-Eyes said, spacing out the syllables.

"So come on. Buy me, I'm easy. Tell old Uncle Ben all."

Beady-Eyes glared at me, then jerked his head at his cohorts. "See you in the car in five minutes."

As they left, I asked, "Can I get into my clothes first?"

It was only by the merest chance that I was in my apartment when the phone rang at four thirty Friday. "Detectives," I answered.

"Just want to thank you," came Paul Murray's very long-distance voice. "You did perfect."

I lowered myself to a chair at the kitchen table. "So," I said, "you still at large?"

"Oh, for sure."

"Gail's with you, I presume." Murray chuckled. "See for yourself." Silence, a snatch of female giggling, then Gail herself said, "Hi, Ben."

"Huh. Coulda swore you wanted nothing to do with him."

"I know," she drawled, "and

what I said about Paul is true, he can be *such* a bastard—but I can't help it, I love him." She squealed and laughed as if she'd been touched somewhere sensitive.

Very deliberately I asked, "You knew all along he was selling defense secrets to the Soviets?"

"Of course," she answered airily. "We're married. We keep no secrets from each other." I heard some muffled whispering, then Paul Murray came back on, voice casual. "So you know the whole story."

"Not all of it, no, sir. Where you been all these years?"

"Here and there," Murray replied. "See, it started when I was on a West Coast trip, and I got a tip that my cover had been blown, the company was suspicious of me, and the FBI was closing in. Fortunately, it wasn't any big problem to fly from Seattle to—the Far East. And I got lost there."

"Close call."

"Ah, risk of the trade. Anyway, I fully intended to send for Gail, but one thing led to another, I kept putting it off . . . I can't help it, I like to get around, have fun, see what's going on. . . . I had plenty of money, no responsibilities. You know how it is, Ben."

"Not exactly, no. I've lived right here most of my life."

"Well, trust me. Anyway,

what I said about Gail before was true. I finally got fed up, I had to find her and get her back. I *do* love her, Perkins." A pause, some muffled giggling from that end. "But I couldn't come back for her myself. I knew my name and face were on every hot list there is. So I called for her—and lo and behold, our phone number belonged to someone else."

"Specifically," I said, "the government guys. They took over your number. Spent all these years hoping you'd call, hoping to get a line on you."

Murray snorted. "So *that* was it! Sneaky bastards."

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. "Not as sneaky as you. That special phrase you gave me to tell Gail—I thought that was some personal lovey-dovey bit at the time. But it wasn't, was it? It was a code message, right?"

"You're doing fine."

"So she'd know it was you."

"We set it up years ago, when I began my—my freelance work. Just in case things went sour and I had to get word to her."

"That phrase," I went on, "it verifies it's you, right? Probably also tells her where exactly to meet you."

"Right on, Perkins. The middle word's the location. 'Party' means Madrid. 'Get it on' means Rio. 'Disco' means Cairo. 'Boogie' means—well . . . God-

damn, you're smart. Gail wasn't all that impressed with you, but you're okay, you know?"

"Only thing I can't figure is how Gail slipped past the Feds. They had the airport covered."

"*Cincinnati* airport, yeah. But she drove up to Dayton, caught a flight to Chicago. From there it was a direct flight to . . ."

"To where?"

Murray laughed. "Hey, I better run, this call is starting to cost me serious dough. Besides, this woman here is having trouble keeping her hands off me." Silence, then he muttered, "Cut it out, babe!"

I breathed deeply. "So you don't want to tell me where you are. Just give me one hint. Is it tomorrow there?"

"Yeah, it's tomorrow."

"So, uh, how *is* tomorrow?"

"Fantastic."

"Tomorrow tends to be like that."

Silence broken only by a low surflike hiss. "You sound bitter, Ben."

"Hey, I was a patsy. I helped a confessed spy. Forgive me for not feeling too tickled just now."

When he answered, his tone was indignant. "Even confessed spies deserve help every now

and then, and where else can we turn but to a private detective? Personally I feel real lucky I stumbled onto you. Don't be such a bigot."

"Plus which," I pressed on harshly, "I nearly got *myself* mangled up by the Feds on an accessory rap. Thanks loads."

"I notice," Murray said deliberately, "that you're at home, so they must not have been able to make it stick all that well."

"Be that as it may."

"And you got paid, and pretty handsomely at that."

I retorted doggedly, "Maybe I don't want any part of that kind of money. Maybe I'll just give it away to a worthy cause."

"Fat chance." Silence, muffled giggles. "Hey, gotta go, pal. Seriously, thanks again. And so long from tomorrow."

On reflection, I realized that I didn't really help a confessed spy. What I did was help reunite two estranged lovebirds. Gave me a nice warm fuzzy feeling.

Even if Murray hadn't earned the money honestly, I had.

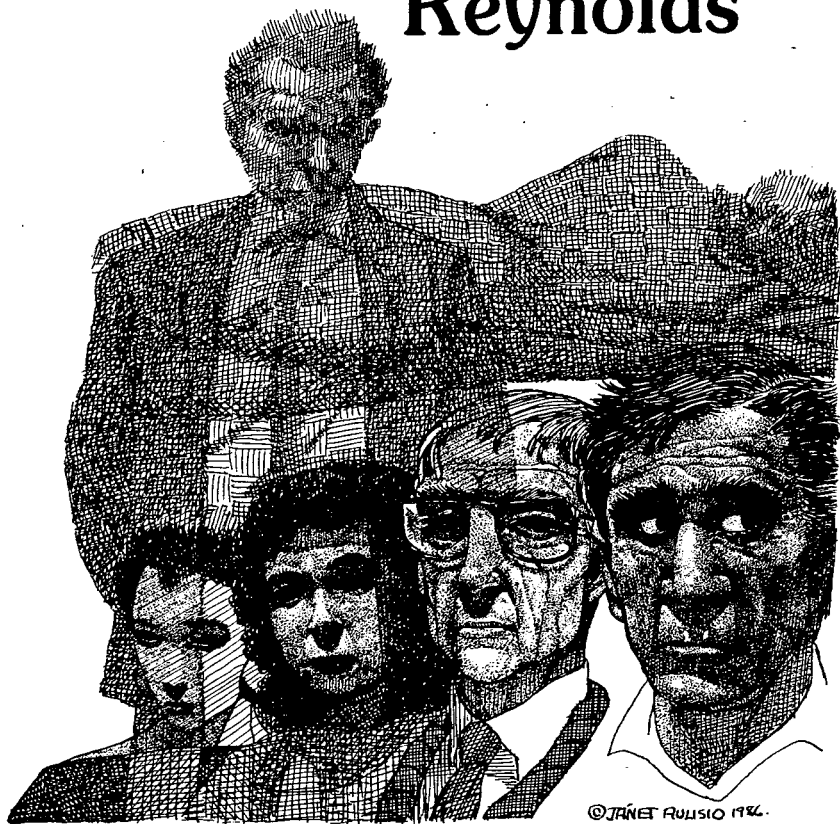
And money has no conscience.

So I spent it.

FICTION

Guilt Enough to Go Around

by William J.
Reynolds



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Illustration by Janet Aulisio

“**B**ad policy, Nebraska,” Gleason said. “Letting clients get killed like that.”

I looked at him. Eddie Gleason. Fat Eddie, we called him. Not *Fast* Eddie, but Fat Eddie, for the very good reason that he was fat.

Not a bad cop, Eddie Gleason. Not a stupid cop. A lazy cop, which is worse. Fat Eddie was six, eight months out from his big two-oh with the Omaha Police Division, which meant he didn't give a great goddamn about much of anything except coasting along until his pension was vested.

Which was why I was there, waiting for Gleason to finish up with the coroner and the forensics guys and who-knew-who-else in the kitchen. Oh, Fat Eddie would've liked me to think I was there on account of some gee-whiz professional courtesy thing on his part, since the decedent, Claire Masters, had indeed been my client for not quite forty-eight hours. But the fact is that Fat Eddie was a lazy cop, and as soon as he learned of my connection to Claire Masters he was inviting me to come have a look at the scene. If I happened to do a little of the detective drudgery for him whilst I was there... well, golly, what a coincidence.

Fat Eddie propelled his ton-

nage across the darkening living room of the Masterses' spacious split-level house on a quiet, treelined street not far from the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus. If I sound a little like a real estate come-on, it's only because the Masterses' living room was just slightly smaller than my entire apartment on Decatur Street, a few miles east and north.

“Where's your girlfriend?”

He meant Koosje Van der Beek, who had been a good friend of Claire Masters's and who had been with me when Gleason called. Don't give yourself headaches trying to pronounce the name, by the way. It's Dutch, and if you say *KOH-shuh VANDerbeck* you'll be close enough.

I angled my head toward the darkened hallway off the living room. “With the daughter.”

Fat Eddie nodded. “Must be real tough on a girl her age to lose her mother like that,” he said profoundly.

The Claire Masters business was a friend-of-a-friend deal. Claire's husband was Judge Nigel Masters, whom you may have heard of thanks to a *60 Minutes* report on him a year, eighteen months ago. More recently, for the past month or so, the judge had been getting threatening phone calls. In typical Masters fashion, he refused

to do anything about them. These weren't the first threats he had heard in a long, meritorious, and notably cantankerous career on the bench. They wouldn't be the last, he reckoned. And he didn't see the point of encouraging the crackpot who was telephoning—and the other crackpots who were *not* telephoning—by giving them attention.

Enter our hero.

When Claire decided to do an end-run around the judge, she talked to her good friend Koosje, Koosje talked to her good friend the once and sometimes private investigator, and . . . you get the idea.

"The most important thing is that Nigel never find out," Claire Masters had told me. We were in Koosje's office, in a small professional building nestled in a shallow bluff behind the Indian Hills shopping center. Koosje sat at her small, cluttered desk, I filled a comfortably low-slung guest chair, and Claire put a strain on the carpet, examining but not really seeing Koosje's sundry degrees and certificates. Koosje's a psychologist. A good one, she tells me.

"The *most* important thing, Mrs. Masters, is that I know what you expect me to do. So far, I've heard only the problem. What would you consider a solution?"

I got the feeling she hadn't considered it. That happens. People fix on the problem and all the terrible things that may happen because of the problem, but they sort of forget about the solution side of things. Claire Masters stopped, turned from the wall, and looked at me as if I'd just appeared. I put her age at fifty-five, fifty-seven, somewhere in there. She was a fine-looking woman; not too many years ago she would have been beautiful, but time and gravity take their toll on us all. Her auburn hair was graying, but gently. Her features were still fine, somewhat sharp, and if the lines at mouth and eyes betrayed her age, they in no way undermined her looks. Not to put too fine a point on it, Claire Masters was what every not-yet-middle-aged woman hopes she'll look like when middle age comes.

Clearing her throat delicately, she said, "I want you to find whoever's been threatening Nigel. I want you to make him stop."

"I see. How would you like me to do this?"

"Nebraska." Koosje thought I was being wise with her friend. I wasn't. But I probably wasn't far away from it. "What he means, Claire, is that it's going to be very hard to accomplish anything without Nigel's cooperation."

"Try 'impossible.' I mean, I assume you've already tried a trace on the line . . ."

I stopped because Claire was slowly shaking her head. "I told you, Nigel refuses to do *anything*. He won't even call the police. I would call them myself, but of course, Nigel would learn of it almost immediately and put a stop to it—he's that way—and what good would that do?"

"Well, then, there's a place to start, at least. We'll try putting a wire on the line and see what turns up. I know someone who can help us out on the q.t. That is, if it's okay with you, Mrs. Masters."

"You're absolutely sure my husband won't find out?"

"I'm not *absolutely* sure of *anything*. But I'd say the odds are definitely against it."

A smile began to form, tentatively, and made her pretty. The smile widened, and she became beautiful.

And then we discussed un-beautiful details—my fee, in other words—for another five or ten minutes. Finally Claire reached for her coat and handbag, explaining that she was running late for some quasi-official dinner or other.

"I was going to ask why you were so dolled up," Koosje said. "You look sensational." There followed several minutes' worth of Claire being modest and

Koosje being insistent, of Claire professing a lack of excitement over the evening's festivities and Koosje pretending they sounded fun, of Koosje admiring Claire's gown and Claire lamenting the absence of a pearl necklace she'd planned to wear. "Brenda," she laughed.

"Claire and Nigel's daughter," Koosje said for my benefit.

"Twenty-five years old and still dressing up in mama's clothes—and makeup, and jewelry." Claire laughed again. "I wouldn't mind except Brenda has a habit of borrowing things without asking and then conveniently forgetting she's borrowed them. We could be burglarized and not know it for two or three months."

I facetiously suggested to Koosje that she and I clean out the joint that night while they were at dinner and Koosje rose to show Claire the door and Claire thanked me again and I said we'd be in touch, and so on.

When Koosje came back into the inner office she said, "Well, what do you think?"

I said, "I think the phone trace'll either work or it won't. If it works, I'll drop in on the guy and give my impersonation of a hardboiled private eye. If it doesn't work, I'm out of it. A situation like this calls for the law and its legendary long limbs."

"He said alliteratively," Koosje said.

"Don't be ridiculous; I know how to read and write."

That was Friday evening; this was Sunday evening, and my client was very dead. Not great for business, as Fat Eddie had observed, but I couldn't see a hell of a lot that could be done about it at the moment.

"They're about wrapped up in there," Gleason wheezed. "I suppose you'll want a look."

I nodded. There was no particular reason to look, but I went and looked anyhow.

The kitchen was your typical upper-middle-class kitchen: big, modern, and well-lighted. A small window over the sink looked out onto the back yard. A door in the northwest corner led to the attached garage. A white tape outline on the carpet indicated where the body had lain. Claire had already been taken away. But the dark stain within the outline was, in a way, more awful than a corpse would have been. The counter and cabinets beyond were speckled and splattered with blood that was now the color of old rust.

I knew better than to expect Fat Eddie to go out of his way to be helpful—or anything else—so I asked what had been used.

"Thirty-eight."

"What's the setup?"

"Way we figure it, someone came in when she was here alone and emptied a gun into her."

"No fooling. Candidates?"

"We figure it's this guy the judge says's been calling up with threats."

"You do, huh? Now why would someone threaten a man for six weeks and then go shoot the wife?"

"We figure he figured the best way to hurt the judge was to kill his wife."

"No, you don't. You figure if the division creates a special investigation squad to find the caller, *you* won't have to bother finding out who *really* killed Claire Masters."

"Hey—"

I ignored him and turned to one of the three forensics men who were still carefully exploring the room.

"What do these tape outlines on the floor mean? The little ones?"

He looked. On either side of the outline of the body, like little satellites, were small open squares made of adhesive tape. "The victim had apparently been holding two coffee mugs when she was killed," the forensics cop said. "The tape indicates where the mugs fell."

"How often do you buy coffee for strangers?" I said to Gleason.

son. "You know as well as I do that Claire opened the back door to someone, someone she knew—friends almost always use the back door—and got down two mugs because she was under the mistaken impression that they were going to have a nice chat. What's that character doing?" I indicated another forensics man, who was down on all fours probing beneath the refrigerator.

"She was wearing a string of beads that broke when she went down," Gleason said.

"Pearls," corrected the man on the floor, as he used an oversized tweezers to collect one from under a cabinet and deposit it—the pearl—in a polythene bag.

"They were all over the place," said Gleason. "We're making sure we got 'em all." I liked that "we"; it implied Fat Eddie himself might now be crawling around on the floor if the other fellow hadn't beat him to it. "Here," he added brusquely, and handed me some small cards.

The cards were pictures, Polaroids—"Roids," they call them downtown. The police photographer carries an instant camera and gets some Roids into the investigator's hands right away so they won't have to wait around for the big glossies to be developed. Later the detectives study the glossies for details

that don't show up in instant pictures.

The Roids were predictably horrendous, a gruesome scene aided not at all by harsh, flat, flash lighting. I had half a dozen shots of Claire Masters from various distances and angles, lying amid two coffee mugs and a dozen or more small white beads and her own blood.

I handed them back to Fat Eddie, who tucked them into the breast pocket of his sport coat. "Is it too much to expect that you may know when it all happened?"

"Coroner says between two thirty and four thirty. Two thirty's when the judge left to play racquetball at his club. Four thirty was when the body was discovered."

"The scientific method," I said. "Masters found her?"

Gleason shook his oblong head. "Friend. Lois Heyes. Says she didn't see anyone or anything suspicious. Knocked on the back door, didn't get an answer, tried it, found it was unlocked, stuck her head in, and . . ." He let it go with a shrug.

"Neighbors hear or see anything odd?"

"It's Sunday, Nebraska. Who's home? Besides, with this cold weather, anyone who was home'd have the windows shut tight. They wouldn't hear anything. Leastways, no one did."

I nodded. "What about the judge?"

"What about him? He was at his club. Guess he's got a standing date with this guy, John Heyes, Lois's husband. Heyes was Masters's partner before Masters got to be a judge. They've all been friends since about forever, the Heyeses and the Masterses. We sent a car—it's about ten minutes away is all—and there he was."

"And they're still here?"

Fat Eddie nodded, and the flab under his chin jiggled. "Masters, both the Heyeses, and the girl, the daughter. Masters called her right away. But you already knew that."

"Can I see them?"

"What am I, an optometrist?"

Gleason laughed wheezingly, and I wondered how long he'd waited for a chance to use that line.

With his thinning white hair and his deeply lined face and his nonsense steel-rimmed glasses, Nigel Masters looked much older than his wife had—although I knew the difference was measurable only in months. The judge was a thin, seemingly fit man, judicial looking even in the casual sweater and slacks he now wore.

"We found him and John Heyes in a large basement room that

had been converted into a comfortable office. Heyes was about the judge's age, somewhat taller and broader, with reddish hair only beginning to gray. Fat Eddie made the introductions, and I expressed condolences to Masters for his loss and apologies for intruding upon his grief. He waved them off gracefully.

Gleason got the ball rolling. "We hate to do this, judge, but we've got to ask you what you were doing this afternoon."

Masters smiled blandly. His face was ashen, almost paralyzed-looking, but he was handling himself well. "Covering all the bases, eh? Good. Well, you know the answer, sergeant. John here and I meet every Sunday, or darn near, for a game or two of racquetball. That's where I was today. That's where I was when your man came."

"How long were you there?" I asked.

"I left here at around two fifteen, two thirty. The police arrived at—what would you say, John, five? Two and a half hours, say."

"What about you, Mr. Heyes?" Gleason asked.

Heyes tugged at one cuff of his green chamois sport shirt. "When was I at the club? Let's see . . . I suppose I arrived at two. I know I warmed up a while, holding the court and

waiting for Nigel. Yes, two o'clock. And, of course, I left when the police came for Nigel."

"Who there can confirm your presence?"

I asked it of no one in particular, but Masters took it upon himself to answer. "We can vouch for each other, obviously. Beyond that, there must have been twenty-five or thirty people there this afternoon."

"I had to sign in for the court," Heyes said quickly. "That will show when I arrived."

"What I'm getting at is, indications are that Mrs. Masters knew her killer. The killer came to the back door, she admitted him—or her—and was preparing to pour two cups of coffee. Now, with the club only minutes away, one or the other of you could have slipped out, come here, and been back within twenty minutes or half an hour."

Heyes said, "I can't believe you actually—"

The judge said, "I see. Well, in that case, I'm in trouble. After our game, I fell into conversation with a fellow while John went on to the locker room. John was out of the shower by the time I got there, so he dressed and went on to the clubroom while I cleaned up. I suppose that was a good half hour. And I don't suppose anyone could swear to seeing me in that time. The showers are pri-

vate, and there was no one in the section where my locker is."

"That's probably enough time right there," I said. "Or so some might say."

He grinned solemnly. "I know one or two prosecutors who *would* say. But what motive would I have?"

I shrugged. "You tell me, Judge Masters. If you were prosecuting you, what sort of ammunition would you use?"

He put his head back and scratched his throat. "Oh . . . the most obvious is that I've been considering running for governor next year. *Had* been considering, I ought to say. I doubt I'll have the heart for it now." He paused, and his eyes grew shiny behind the glasses. "Anyhow, Claire was against the idea—she had a deep, vehement loathing of politicians—and we went 'round on it a lot. If I were a sharp young D.A., I'd pick up on that. And the fact that I will inherit the lion's share of Claire's estate, the money her father left her. Not a fortune, by today's standards, but a sizable war-chest."

"Good God, Nigel, shut up before you find yourself behind bars."

Masters gave Heyes a look. "None of this is a deep dark secret, John. What's the point of playing games?"

Heyes nibbled at a bit of dry skin on his lower lip. "In that case . . ." he began hesitantly. Three pairs of eyes turned to him. "I suppose my . . . alibi isn't exactly airtight, either.

"I'd forgotten: After I left the locker room I went to the grill, ordered a drink, and sat down to look at the paper. Then I realized I'd left my reading glasses in the car, so I got up and went to get them. Since I stopped at the men's room on the way back, I was probably gone twenty minutes, maybe more."

He looked at Gleason. "When your people get to that point in the investigation, someone may recall my leaving for a while. That's the reason. Unfortunately, I didn't meet anyone — not anyone who could swear that I was doing what I was doing."

He looked at us in turn. "But why would I want to kill her?"

“John was in love with her,” said Brenda Masters. “He always has been.”

Brenda, I reflected, should know. Heyes had been her father's law partner and, with Lois Heyes, a close friend of the family. Now Brenda worked in Heyes's firm as a legal secretary. She probably knew him as well as she knew her old man.

"Not that that means any-

thing—except that he didn't, *couldn't* have, killed her." She ran a long-nailed hand through short brown hair which looked styled by Mixmaster. Brenda was a younger edition of Claire, with the same sharp, fine features. At the moment, those features were a mess, understandably enough.

"John and my mother dated in college, you know," said Brenda with a snuffle. I exchanged eyebrows-up with Koojsje, who had been comforting Brenda until Fat Eddie and I went back to her bedroom. It was a frilly sort of room, obviously unchanged since the day Brenda moved out on her own.

"John and my dad were room-mates. My mother and Lois were best friends. John fixed my dad up with Lois one time for a double date and, well, I guess after that everyone just sort of switched partners."

"How did Heyes and your mother get along?" Gleason asked.

"You mean lately? Super. They were best friends, all four of them. No lingering jealousy or unrequited love or anything, if that's what you're getting at. They were . . . friends. Almost like brother and sister."

Brenda's gray eyes welled up again and spilled over. As she dabbed at them, Gleason asked

about her whereabouts that afternoon.

"I was at home," she sniffled.

"Alone?"

"Alone. All day. Sunday's the only day I can have all to myself. I didn't even talk to anyone on the phone until my dad called."

"How about you and your mother? How did you get on?"

"Great." Realizing, perhaps, that it had come out rather hastily, she added, "Well, you know how it is. Not great *all* the time, but usually great."

"When wasn't it great?" I asked.

Brenda hesitated. "I—well, Mother thought I was wasting my time as a secretary, even a legal secretary. She wanted me to go to law school. We used to . . . not fight, exactly, but disagree about it. Her argument was that I'd be a good lawyer. And, yes, I would—only I don't *want* to be a lawyer, and I could never seem to make her understand that." She sniffled some more and gave her wadded Kleenex some more work.

Koojse said to me, "You don't think this girl killed her own mother?"

I said to Gleason, "How come people always say things like that? No, I don't think that—necessarily. But I'm pretty sure *somebody* killed her, and indications are it was a some-

body she knew, and rather well."

"Do the words 'innocent till proven guilty' ring a bell with you?" Koojse said. "How about the word 'motive'?"

I shrugged. "They fought."

"'They fought.' I can see you've never been a mother or a daughter. Of *course* they fought. But no one ever got killed for disapproving of someone's career choice."

Brenda had been silent throughout the exchange. Now she looked at me, Gleason, Koojse. "I l-l-loved my mother," she bleated. And then the waterworks began again in earnest.

“**T**hat was a rotten way to treat her,” Koojse whispered harshly as we moved into the darkened hallway.

"That was a birthday party compared to what she might get from an ambitious young prosecutor. A smart one—a ruthless one—could build a whole political career on this. And what I said in there is true: someone killed Claire Masters."

"Not necessarily someone in this house," she retorted hotly.

"Gotta start somewhere," said Fat Eddie philosophically.

"I don't mean to put a damper on your fun, but from the sounds of it you've questioned three of

the four people in this house, and *any* of them *could* have done it—though none of them has a motive worthy of the name.”

“Me, I think Masters did it. He’s got the most to gain.”

I looked at Gleason. “Masters didn’t do it. The setup’s wrong. He was supposed to be at the club. If he suddenly walked in, her natural question would be, ‘What happened to your game?’, not, ‘How about a nice cup of coffee?’ ”

Koosje said, “What if she said, ‘What happened to your game?’, he made up some excuse, and she said, ‘How about a nice cup of coffee?’ ”

“Doesn’t work. See for yourself.” I helped myself to the Polaroids in Fat Eddie’s breast pocket and handed them to her. She blanched a little but said nothing. “See? From the way she’s lying, she was facing the back door when she was shot. She reached for the mugs, the killer said something, she turned, and *bang*. The killer was still standing in or near the doorway. You wouldn’t do that if you owned the house. You’d come in, throw your coat on the kitchen table, grab something out of the fridge.”

“Unless,” said Gleason, “Masters wanted it to look like a stranger did the killing.”

“But it *doesn’t* look like a

stranger did it. It looks like a friend did it. Look, if I were Masters and I were going to kill Claire, I’d make it look like a stranger broke in and killed her. It’d fit your half-baked theory that the nuisance caller did it. The way this is set up, though, it’s obvious Claire knew her murderer. No cold, calculating, murderous husband—or wife—would phony it up like that.

“Plus, this crime has a spur-of-the-moment feel to it. This business of going to the club, sneaking out of the club, killing her, sneaking back . . . nah. On *Columbo*, maybe. Not here.”

Koosje handed back the pictures, which, after her initial reticence, she had studied closely. “Then that lets Heyes off the hook, too. Are those marbles all over the floor?” she added, indicating the Roids.

I returned the pictures to their rightful owner. “Pearls. She broke her necklace when she went down. I thought Heyes was out of the running, too, but Brenda’s tale of Claire and John and Nigel and Lois is . . . interesting.”

“You think Heyes and the Masters woman were still getting it on after all these years?” Gleason wondered, his piggy eyes narrowing even farther than usual. “Yeah . . . maybe something went sour. She was breaking it off, she was gonna

tell his wife—something. So Heyes had to shut her up.”

“That,” said Koosje, “is ridiculous. I’ve known Claire Masters for six years, and she was simply not the type to have an extramarital affair. Absolutely not.”

“It—it may not mean anything,” said Lois Heyes, “but I think Claire may have been . . . seeing someone.”

“You mean she had a lover,” Fat Eddie said undelicately.

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

She looked past me and out the window behind me. It was almost dark now. We were in the Masterses’ guest room, where Gleason had installed Lois after arriving in response to her call. A plump, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, Lois Heyes was noticeably distant, withdrawn. We all handle shock and grief differently, I reflected. From Masters’s stiff upper lip to Heyes’s slight twitchiness to Brenda’s outright tears to Lois Heyes’s numbness.

“I don’t know,” she said at length. “Just . . . a feeling. I knew her so long, so well. We were like sisters.” Her voice quavered, but that’s all. “I just . . .” She shook her head. “Just a feeling, that’s all. I

wouldn’t even mention it, except . . . maybe it will help. Somehow.”

I looked at Koosje, who frowned.

Gleason was asking Lois the standard where-were-you questions.

She closed her eyes and put her head against the back of the armchair she occupied. “Again? All right . . . I got up at eight, we went to church, we had brunch at Firmature’s, we came home, John went to meet Nigel at the club, I stayed home and picked up the house a little. I was out of town on business last week, and the place was a bit of a mess. Then I came over here to return some records I’d borrowed from Claire . . . and the rest you know.”

“What time was this?”

“Which part? I left my house at four, or shortly after. I got here at four thirty, or shortly before.”

“The call came in at four twenty-eight,” Gleason supplied.

“I knocked, then opened the back door,” Lois said tonelessly. “I saw . . . Claire. Then I dropped the records and called the police.”

Gleason and I exchanged glances to see who was going to say it. He lost.

“Mrs. Heyes, do you own a gun?”

"No," she told him. "But my husband does."

Again I glanced at Koosje, who, occupied with her own thoughts, ignored me. To Lois Heyes I said, "What kind of gun?"

"I have no idea."

"How did your husband and Claire Masters get along?"

Her eyes shifted to me. "What are you getting at?"

For what seemed the tenthousandth time I explained that Claire was killed by someone who knew her. I barely got through it before Mrs. Heyes began shaking her head determinedly. "Don't be an idiot," she suggested. "John didn't kill Claire. He loved her."

"How much?"

"That isn't even worth an answer."

"All right. Maybe this one is: Did you kill Claire Masters?"

To Gleason she said, "Do I have to put up with this?"

"Sooner or later, yeah."

Lois Heyes made a disgusted noise. "Why would I want to kill Claire? She was my best friend. My best friend for—" her voice cracked—"thirty years."

"Were your husband and Claire Masters—"

"Nebraska," Koosje butted in suddenly. "I need to talk to you."

She marched off toward the bedroom door, and I, non-

plussed, followed her into the hallway.

Her eyes were bright and her breathing a little heavy when she turned to me after closing the door. "I've figured it out," she whispered animatedly. "I know who the killer is."

In the mystery stories, the intrepid hero eventually gets to gather all the suspects together and, after suitable dramatic delays, uncork the foul killer's identity. In my long, unillustrious career as a private investigator, I had never had such an opportunity. Presented with one now, I was not about to let it pass me by.

We were assembled in the living room—Nigel and Brenda Masters, John and Lois Heyes, Fat Eddie and two uniformed OPD cops, Koosje, and me. Except for the uniforms and me, everyone was seated here or there around the wide room. I took up a position somewhere near the center of the carpet, and launched into it.

"Claire Masters died in vain," I began theatrically. "Everybody does, when you think about it, but Claire especially. You'll see why directly.

"Because we knew Claire had been murdered by someone close to her, and because the people in this room—with the exception of those of us here in an

investigatory capacity—were closest to her, we began by questioning you.”

“They already know this part,” Koosje said.

“My lovely assistant, Koosje Van der Beek. It was she who supplied the key necessary to the solution of this little whodunit.

“But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s start at the top, with Judge Masters.

“By his own admission, the judge has a pretty good motive. He also is unaccounted for for a certain length of time this afternoon—sufficient time to sneak back here and kill Claire.”

Brenda sniffed and began weeping quietly.

“But for reasons I’ve already shared with the police, and which I see no need to reiterate now, I don’t think the judge did it. Suffice to say it just doesn’t add up right.”

I moved a few steps toward a fat wingback chair in which Heyes sat ramrod straight.

“Next up, John Heyes. Mr. Heyes dated Claire in college—”

“That was years ago!”

“—years ago. It’s been suggested that he may still have been in love with her—”

“What!”

“—but there’s no evidence that he was or that, if he was, anything was being done about it. He *may* have been having an

affair with Claire, they *may* have had some sort of falling out, he *may* have decided to kill her, he *may* have slipped out of the club and sneaked over here . . . but there’s no reason to believe so.

“In fact, there’s a good reason—in my view, at least—not to believe so: it would have required an awful lot of plotting and planning, and split-second coordination. Most murders don’t happen that way. I certainly don’t think this one did.”

Brenda Masters was sitting one chair over from Heyes; I had to move only a little to face her.

“But, say *Brenda* killed her mother.”

Her gray eyes grew impossibly wide.

“We know Brenda and her mother disagreed about Brenda’s career choice. Claire thought she was wasting her time. Brenda disagreed. Presumably, she’d have liked her mother to climb off her back.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Nebraska,” spewed the judge. “What kind of an argument is that? Besides, if you dismissed John and me because you don’t think the murder was premeditated, then you have to dismiss Brenda for the same reason.”

“Not at all. While either one of you would’ve had to do some

artful dodging to pull off the crime, Brenda would not. She says she was home alone all day. But all we really know is that she was home when you called her.

"Who's to say she and her mother didn't talk by telephone this afternoon? Who's to say they didn't argue again? And who's to say Brenda didn't have it up to here, take a gun, and drive out here with the burning intention of *finally* ending the argument?"

She was crying again, of course.

"My brilliant aide and confidante"—I indicated Koosje—"originally dismissed the notion out of hand, but quickly warmed to it when she spotted the vital clue we all had missed."

I paused and surveyed the room, milking the moment for all it was worth.

"Pearls," I said at last.

"Pearls," Fat Eddie repeated stupidly.

I had again borrowed the Polaroids from him; now I handed them to John Heyes. "What do you make of these, Heyes?"

"Well . . ." he said uncertainly, shuffling through them with distaste. "I assume you're referring to the pearls scattered on the floor. The police say her necklace broke when she was shot. I suppose that must be where the pearls came from."

"Uh-huh. How about you, judge?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? What isn't obvious is what you're getting at—if anything."

To Gleason I said, "Where did you find the string these pearls were on?"

He shifted his bulk a little. "We, uh, didn't, exactly." He sat up a bit and tried to sound very official. "We speculate that the killer moved close enough to see whether Mrs. Masters was dead, avoiding stepping in the blood on the kitchen carpet but not the string, which adhered to his shoe when he left."

"Very nice," I said. "Gleason, you are an idiot. But don't feel so bad because I am too, and so is the judge and so is Mr. Heyes. We all were ignorant of the fact that, except on TV, pearls are not simply bunched up on a length of dental floss.

"A pearl is slipped onto the string, then the string is knotted to hold the pearl in place, then another pearl is added, then another knot, and so on. If you break the string, you lose only one or two pearls. They *don't* all go spilling across the room."

Masters' eyes were alight. "Then . . . someone *cut* the strand."

"As Dr. Van der Beek deduced. She also concluded—somewhat sexistly, I might

add—that a woman not only would be more likely than a man to know these details, but also that a woman would be more apt to painstakingly destroy jewelry belonging to a woman she had reason to hate. And kill.”

I returned to Brenda Masters. “Furthermore, Koosje recalled Claire’s mentioning to us the night before last that her pearl necklace was in Brenda’s possession.

“That suggests a scenario in which Brenda, furious with her mother, destroys the necklace she has borrowed, drives over here, and, in a final gesture of rage, flings the handful of pearls at Claire—either before or after pulling the trigger.”

I looked down at Brenda, who was agog—paralyzed.

“So it is, Brenda, that Dr. Van der Beek has fingered you as the murderer.”

Self-importantly, Gleason hauled himself off the settee and moved on the speechless girl.

I smiled at him. “Unfortunately, it’s all balderdash.”

“**R**ight church, wrong pew,” I said to Koosje, consolingly. “If Brenda had been here with Claire, if they fought, and if Brenda then killed her in a rage, that would

have been one thing. But if they fought by *telephone*, for crying out loud, and then Brenda had to drive crosstown to do the deed—after cutting the necklace—I think most of her murderous rage would have evaporated by the time she got here. Unless Brenda’s *really* off her rocker, which it doesn’t seem to me she is, the motivation just isn’t that strong.”

I turned away from Koosje.

“Not as strong as yours, Mrs. Heyes, is it?”

She said nothing, merely returned my gaze.

“You had a double incentive. Your husband had betrayed you, *with your best and oldest friend*. That must have been unbearable. Literally unbearable.

“It’s not hard to write the story, Mrs. Heyes. You told us you were cleaning house this afternoon. You found the necklace. In the bedroom? You recognized it as your friend’s—it certainly wasn’t yours—and drew the obvious conclusion.”

“Oh my dear God,” Brenda Masters breathed huskily.

“The rest of it is pretty much as outlined above. Except that when you had killed Claire, you rather cleverly picked up the phone and called the police, instead of running and hiding. After hiding the gun, that is. And then you slipped us that little kernel of information

about Claire's having an affair in order to put us off your trail and onto the unnamed lover's. You even volunteered the fact that your husband owns a gun."

Lois Heyes sat motionless, except for a slight tremble of the lower lip. It was evidence of barely contained rage, not tears. "How could she have done that to me," she whispered viciously.

"She couldn't," I said. "At any rate, she didn't. Mrs. Heyes, you jumped to the wrong conclusion. The necklace was Claire's, but Claire didn't lose it in your bedroom. Brenda did."

I expected tears again from Brenda Masters, but she had used them all up. She sat dumbly, staring at me; Heyes, sitting near her, was gray, horror-stricken.

"While you were away," I said for Lois Heyes's benefit, though I was looking at her husband and his mistress, "these two at some point took advantage of a rare opportunity for a change of venue. In the course

of their . . . rendezvous . . . Brenda's necklace—Claire's necklace—ended up under a bed, under a chair, under a cushion—I don't know where you found it. She probably didn't even miss it.

"Claire Masters died because of someone else's transgression, someone else's faithlessness, someone else's thirst for vengeance.

"If that isn't dying in vain, I don't know what is."

There was no reaction on the part of the three who shared the guilt. No tears; no sobs of remorse, no suicide attempts.

No impassioned denials, either, which was the main thing.

I looked at the three in turn, and thought of Claire Masters—not as she appeared in the Polaroids but as she had been two evenings ago in Koosje's office.

I turned to Fat Eddie. "If it's all the same to you, I want to get the hell away from here," I said.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

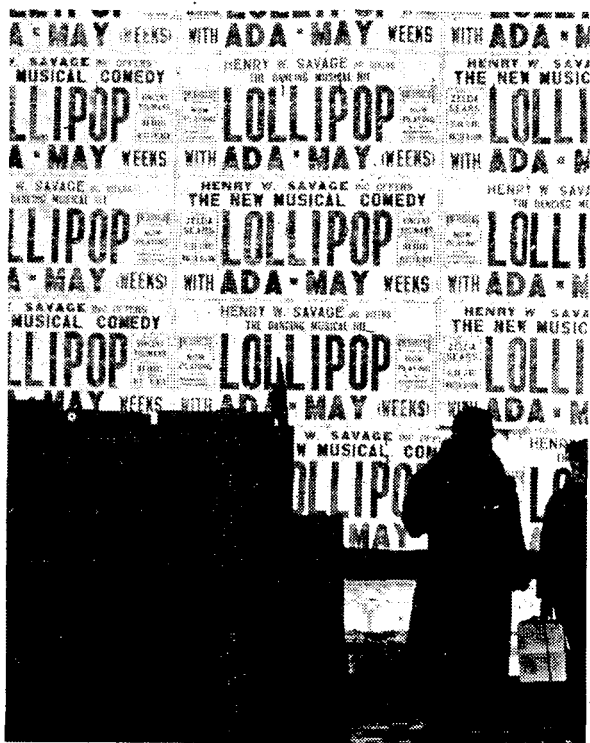
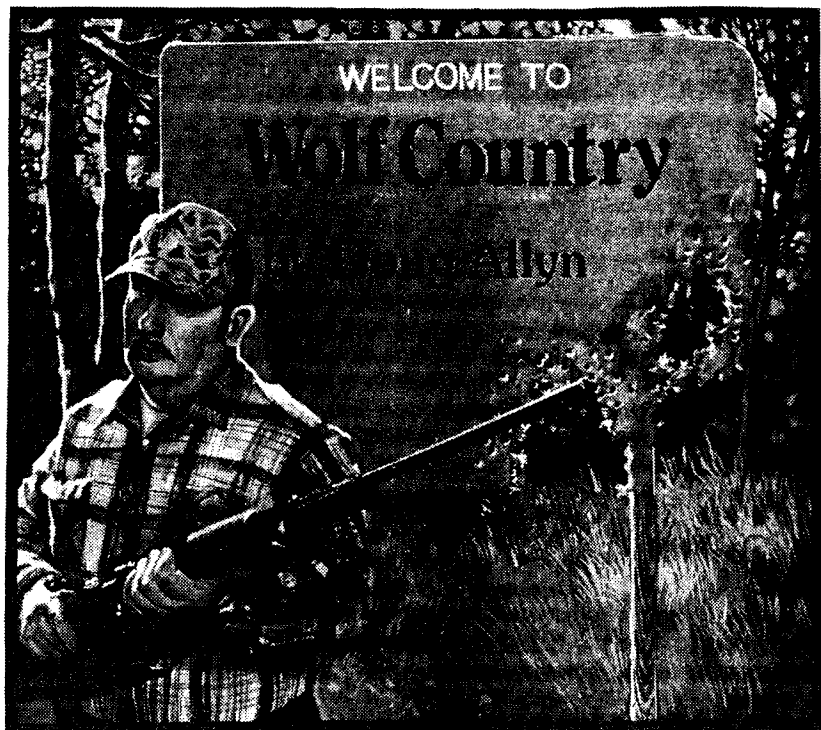


Photo by Ralph Steiner

There's a story here . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious photograph will be found on page 155.



WELCOME TO WOLF COUNTRY. YOU ARE ENTERING ONAGON, POP. 328, HOME OF THE OJIBWA COUNTY WOLVES, MICHIGAN STATE HOCKEY CHAMPIONS, CLASS 'D' 1982, '83, '8—I couldn't tell how many years in a row they'd won the championship. The rest of the sign was missing, torn away by a shotgun blast.

Murdered roadsigns aren't

unusual this time of year. Over a million hunters lay siege to the north country during the November deer season. They kill a hundred thousand deer, seven million beers, and a fair number of highway signs. And sometimes they kill each other.

The Onagon Village Office was easy to find. Two black and white sheriff's patrol cars and an emergency rescue van were parked in front of the single story cinder-block building. A

midnight blue state police cruiser was backing out as I approached, and I parked my battered pickup truck in the vacant slot.

I climbed out slowly, stretching to limber up after the two hour drive. One of the county black and whites had a dead six-point buck lashed across its trunk. It was a fresh kill; blood from its body cavity was still steaming as it dripped into the snow of the parking lot. It looked like any other carcass, glazed-eyed, tongue lolling, with a quarter-sized bullet hole through its shoulder, but this was no ordinary deer. When this buck left on its final journey, it hadn't gone alone.

The village office was an open, unpartitioned room, painted off-white from floor to ceiling and lit by fly-specked fluorescent tubes. Two uniformed paramedics and a deputy sheriff were standing near the oil stove in one corner of the room sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups and making conversation. A blocky, hard-eyed Indian woman was huddled on a bench in the opposite corner with a teenaged boy, holding his hands tightly in hers. The kid was wearing a bright orange hunting coat two sizes too big for him and a dazed, empty expression, the kind you see in old photographs of Wounded Knee.

The sheriff was talking on the phone at a shabby metal desk against the wall, gesturing with his coffee cup as though the motion could somehow carry over the line. He was probably pushing forty, but looked younger, with close-cropped reddish-blond hair, and the open, boyish face of a beer-commercial jock. He glanced up at me, frowned, and covered the mouthpiece.

"Something I can do for you?"

"I'm Tony Delacroix. Constable Delacroix."

"Constab—? Oh yeah, you're the guy from the Chippewa Council, right? Be right with you. Look, Sonya," he yelled at the phone, "it's opening day, for crissake. If you can get a minicam here in half an hour I'll be here, but after that I can't promise, okay? Right." He banged the phone down, riffled through a thin sheaf of papers on the desk, and handed one to me. "This is the hunter casualty report. There's no spot for your signature since we're in a new situation here. Look it over and sign it below my name, please."

I sat on the edge of the desk and scanned the report. The sections for visibility, terrain, distance, and weapon were all properly filled in, and the sheriff's signature was at the bottom. Cyrus Brandt. It was

everything I needed to know about the killing. And nothing.

"What happened, exactly?" I asked.

"Hunting accident, pure and simple. The victim was trespassing and had the bad luck to be in the line of fire when the LaPlaunt boy opened up on a deer. We're treating it as an Accidental Hunting Fatality, no charges filed against the boy, no inquest. Maybe the kid should have aimed a little better, but . . ." He shrugged.

"And the Big Bear Hunt Club? What's that?"

"It's a private lodge. Local businessman owns forty acres and leases three thousand more from the Council. It's all properly fenced and posted."

"But the shooting took place in the leased section? On tribal lands?"

"Correct. And since the LaPlaunt kid's an Indian, I thought you folks might want to okay the paperwork, as a courtesy you understand. For the moment, the tribal lands are still under my jurisdiction."

"I imagine whose jurisdiction it is will be determined eventually by one of the Council lawsuits," I said, "but it doesn't matter." I tossed the report on the desk. "I can't sign this."

"Our investigation—"

"Oh, I'm not questioning anything. It looks all right. But I've

got my orders. It happened on tribal land, we investigate it. Period."

"I see," he sighed, leaning back in his chair. "What you're saying is, the Council wants to set some kind of precedent here. Okay, I've got no problem with that, my people are spread too thin anyway. But why don't we save our little pissin' contest till next time. That kid over there is only sixteen and he killed his first buck and his first man this morning. What about him? Am I supposed to lock him up while you play detective?"

I glanced back at the boy and the woman, huddled in the corner like refugees. The boy's eyes had no more life in them than the deer stiffening outside in the snow.

"I don't claim any authority here," I said, turning back to Brandt. "He's your responsibility."

"Nope," the sheriff said slowly, "it ain't gonna be that simple, mister. I called you in because nobody knows how this jurisdiction thing is gonna work out in the courts and I want everything kosher. But I've got to run for election around here. I'm not gonna release LaPlaunt and then have you decide he's a dangerous felon. Come on, be reasonable. There's a lot of bad feeling in the county about the Chippewa lawsuits. People re-

sented the extended hunting and fishing rights the tribes have, and now nobody's sure who owns what any more and they're edgy. An Indian kid killing a white man . . ." He shook his head. "Look, I'll list you as an investigating officer if you want, but let's sign the damn papers and wrap this up, okay?"

"How far is the Big Bear Lodge from here?"

"Seven or eight miles. Why?"

"Tell you what, I'm not familiar with the area. Help me out. Show me the site, what was where, and I'll be as brief as possible. Fair enough?"

"It would be except for the kid," he said, glancing at his watch. "It's nearly eleven and since Onagon's got the only restaurant in thirty miles, it's gonna start filling up with orange suits and bowie knives. I guess I can drop the kid and his mother at my house, nobody'll bother 'em there. But I've got to be here to handle the TV people and keep an eye on things. I can lend you a deputy for an hour or so, but that's it. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," I said.

"Fair enough. Clayton!"

The lanky deputy detached himself from the group by the stove and sauntered over. He was bigger than he'd appeared to be at first, but maybe it was

just the immaculate brown uniform. People tend to look bigger in uniforms, or think they do. He had an angular, hawkish face, and a skimpy blond mustache that failed to conceal the cleft palate notch in his upper lip.

"Lee Clayton, Tony Delacroix," Brandt said. Clayton nodded, sizing me up over his coffee cup. He didn't seem particularly impressed. Maybe I should have had the laundry iron a crease into my Levi's.

"Lee, take Constable Delacroix here out to the Big Bear and show him the scene of the accident. Let him look as much as he wants, but be at my place by twelve thirty."

"What the hell, Cy, we just got back—"

"Dammit, just do it, okay? And get going. We've got one stiff already and it's barely past breakfast."

Clayton crushed his coffee cup in his palm and tossed it in the general direction of the wastebasket. "Sure, Cy, whatever you say." He turned and stalked out the door, slamming it behind him.

I glanced the question at Brandt.

"Lee's a lovable guy when you get to know him," he said blandly. "Trouble is, it usually takes a few weeks."

"Terrific," I said.

Clayton was already opening the door of his prowler car when I stepped into the parking lot. "Hold on a minute," I called. "I want a quick look at the body."

"It's in the van," he said, nodding at the ambulance. "The kid didn't scalp him, if you're wonderin'."

I trudged through the slush to the rescue van without bothering to reply.

The van was set up for three passengers, with two bunks stacked on one side of a narrow aisle and a bench seat for the attendant on the other. Its only customer was on the lower bunk in a dark green body bag, the heavy non-disposable kind you have to hose out afterwards. The velcro restraining straps sounded like ripping flesh as I peeled them back, science's answer to fingernails scraped across a blackboard. I took a deep breath and unzipped the bag.

One Caucasian male, approximately six feet tall, coarse brown hair going gray at the temples, brown eyes staring up at the bottom of the bunk above. He was wearing a mottled green camouflage coat and a surprised expression, possibly caused by the onset of rigor mortis or possibly by the blood-soaked wound in his chest,

twelve inches below his chin. A moot point either way. He looked . . . seedy, like a derelict. His coat was frayed and he had a three day stubble, but it was more than that. It was . . . whisky. The scent of it hovered faintly above the corpse, mingled with the sour-earth stench of blood and urine. I forced myself to lean close to his mouth to be sure. The van suddenly shifted and darkened as Clayton stepped into the doorway. My lips brushed the mouth of the corpse and I straightened, banging my head on the upper bunk.

"Jesus H. Christ," Clayton said softly, "what the hell do you think you're doin'?"

"Smelling his breath," I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, using every ounce of willpower I had to keep from bolting past him into the open.

"He ain't got any breath," Clayton said. "He's dead."

"No kidding. Well, from the smell of him, I'd say he was close to dead drunk when he checked out."

"There was an empty pint near his body," Clayton nodded. "Maybe it eased the pain some when the Indian kid blew him away."

"Maybe," I said, zipping up the bag and strapping the body down again. "You know him?"

"Sort of. Name's Arnie Kee-

fer. He was a couple years ahead of me in high school. Big football hero. Married the homecoming queen. Probably the only righteous time he ever had in his life."

"She been notified?"

"No reason to. They're divorced. She dumped him a while back and moved on to better things. She's down in Saginaw now. He kinda went in the toilet after that. Too much booze. Mean as a snake when he had a buzz on."

"He looks like he was on a downhill slide," I said, stepping out of the van, trying not to gulp the fresh air.

"That's because he made mistake number one," Clayton said, slamming the ambulance door. "He didn't get out."

"How do you mean?"

He didn't answer. I followed him to the patrol car and climbed in the passenger side. He revved the engine, then eased off, letting it idle. "You from around here?" he asked abruptly, turning to face me.

"Not from here exactly," I said. "From Marquette."

"Still north country," he shrugged, "so you know what I'm talkin' about. When you got outa school, did you go or stay?"

"I... left," I said. "Joined the army. Did ten."

"Right," he nodded, "you got out. So did I. So did anybody

with any brains. All a man can do up here is scrape by, and that's what Arnie's been doin' since school, just barely scrapin'. Until this morning, that is."

"It can't be all bad," I said. "You came back."

"I had no choice," he said, slamming the car into reverse and backing into the street with a jolt. "My dad got sick and couldn't do for himself. Now with you people, it's different." He shifted again, burning rubber as we roared off down Onagon's only street. "You had somethin' to come back for. Hell, with the courts comin' unglued every time a Chip files a lawsuit, the tribes'll probably end up ownin' the whole north half of the state. Not that it's worth much. Indian country's about all it's good for."

"Wolf country, you mean?" I said, indicating the wounded roadsign as we sped past the city limits.

"Wolf country my ass," he snorted. "There ain't been a wolf around here since the feds exterminated 'em like rats back in the thirties."

"Maybe they'll come back now," I said evenly. "A lot of people thought the Chippewa were finished, too, but we weren't. We're back."

"Maybe so," he said, glancing at me with eyes as empty as the

leaden winter sky, "but the wolves won't be. They did a better job on the wolves."

I let it pass. I never argue with true believers, and Clayton seemed to have a lot more eating at him than a couple of court decisions or a dead man he said he barely knew. Whatever it was, he took it out on the car, gunning the cruiser down the snow-slicked two-lane at seventy, flipping his siren on to blow by an occasional driver with the bad luck to be on the same road with us.

Six miles east of Onagon he threw the patrol car into a power slide, barely missing an oncoming semi as he cut across both lanes onto a back road only slightly wider than the car. The land to the right was marked with steel posts every twenty feet, each with a bright yellow aluminum sign, BIG BEAR/KEEP OUT, and supporting the single strand of wire that meets the legal requirements for trespass, a fence meant for people, not animals.

We were driving through low, swampy country, but ahead of us the scenery was spectacular, rolling forested slopes covered with hardwoods and pine, rising to the hazy foothills of the Porcupine Mountains to the north. Maybe Clayton was right.

It's a cold, unforgiving land, not really meant for farming, but it's the home of the People now and I will not leave it again.

Clayton swung the cruiser hard to the right and we passed through a massive wrought-iron gateway. Big Bear.

The hunting lodge looked like a prop fortress from *Drums Along the Mohawk*, a huge log cabin half a block long and two stories high, complete with widow's walk and a full-width front porch supported by gigantic oak logs still wearing their bark. The only things missing were cannons on the parapets and a redcoat sentry or two. The frontier outpost effect was diminished a bit by the dozen-odd cars parked in a long lean-to beside the building, all late model and top of the line. Clayton stomped the brake pedal and we slid neatly to a halt beside a hitching rail in front of the porch.

"We better check in," he said curtly, climbing out. "One shooting accident a day's enough."

I followed him up the steps to the ornately carved double doors. He tugged the bell pull, a wrist-thick piece of knotted hemp. An Indian woman opened the door, tall, cocoa-eyed, her dark hair cut short and tightly curled. "Yes?"

"Tell Mr. Tolzdorf Deputy

Clayton wants to see him."

She looked us over coolly, then nodded. "Wait here, I'll see if he's in."

"Just get him," Clayton snapped, pushing the door open and stepping inside. The door closed behind us automatically with a gentle shush. Boonesboro was never like this.

The room was the size of a basketball court, lit by wagon wheel chandeliers hanging from the ceiling on anchor chain from the *Andrea Doria*. It was furnished with overstuffed leather armchairs and sofas, a large screen TV in one corner and a fieldstone fireplace in the other. A series of trophy heads were hung at equal intervals around the room, elk, antelope, even a tiger. A hunter's dream, a conservationist's nightmare. The air was thick with cigar smoke and conversation from a poker game at the dining table. A half dozen men were clustered around it, clad in various mixtures of hunting garb and long underwear.

The Indian woman spoke to the man at the head of the table and he nodded and excused himself. A few of the others glanced over at us with mild curiosity, but continued the game. If Keefer's death had clouded their day at all, they were keeping their grief in perspective.

"Clayton," Tolzdorf nodded again brusquely, "what can I do for you?" He was a heavily built barrel of a man, square-faced, sleek, and prosperous. He was dressed casually in a blaze orange shirt and slacks, but they fit as though they'd been tailor-made. They probably had been. His beer stein was beaten silver and monogrammed.

"Sorry to bother you again," Clayton said. "This is Constable Delacroix. The Chippewa Council sent him over to look at the site."

"Constable." Tolzdorf frowned, offering a grizzly-sized paw. "No problems, I hope?" If his handshake was a test of strength, I lost.

"I don't think so," I said, "just routine."

"Good. An unfortunate business, but these things happen. Keefer shouldn't have been up there, the boundary's posted. Bobby obviously should have been a lot more careful, but what the hell, he's only sixteen. Bad luck all around."

"Is the LaPlaunt boy a member here?"

"No, his mother is a cook, and Bobby helps out, does yard work or whatever. He's a good boy, a good worker, loves the woods. Terrible this had to happen on his first hunt."

"Did anybody else actually do any hunting this morning?" I

asked, glancing at the card players.

"Sure," Tolzdorf smiled, "everybody. Don't get the wrong idea about the card game, constable. We were all in the woods before first light. This is just the noon break. We take hunting seriously here."

"I gathered somebody did," I said.

"You mean the trophy heads," he nodded. "Not a bad display, eh? Do you hunt, constable?"

"I used to," I said. "Not any more."

"I've taken game all over the world, Africa, India. Hunting's all played out there now, but there are still some challenges left. Those two whitetails over the fireplace? Both mine. Fine heads but not Boone and Crockett caliber. I got one last year, though, sixth largest ever taken in the U.S. It's not mounted yet, but—here, I can show you." He fumbled in his shirt pocket and pulled out a color photo. It showed him sitting in a snow-drift in front of a stand of cedar holding the head of the biggest whitetail buck I'd ever seen, a three hundred pound giant with a rack of antlers wide enough to give a mountain lion cardiac arrest.

"Quite a deer," I whistled, passing the snapshot to Clayton.

"Personally, I never seen the

point in shootin' things just because they were bigger'n me," the deputy said evenly, handing it back to Tolzdorf without looking at it. "We gotta get movin'. I was wonderin' if we could borrow a snowmobile to get back there, Mr. Tolzdorf. It'd save us a helluva hike."

"No problem," Tolzdorf said, pocketing the photo. "They're parked on the north side with the keys in them. Will you be out there long, do you think?"

"Half an hour in and out oughta do it."

"Good. You can take as long as you like, of course, but we'll be going out again after lunch."

"We'll try to be back by then. Anybody else hunting in the area?"

"No. We've got three thousand acres here, and we keep the blinds as far apart as possible. That's a pretty good area, though, and—"

"I said we'd be back as soon as we can."

"I'd appreciate it," Tolzdorf said coolly. "What are you boys drinking? I'll buy you a little antifreeze for the trail."

"No thanks," Clayton said, shaking his head, "I'm on duty and the constable here probably shouldn't mess with firewater. Might go on the warpath. Thanks for the use of the machine." He turned and stalked out the door, banging it closed.

Tolzdorf stared after him a moment, frowning, then glanced at me, waiting to see how I'd react.

"Maybe another time," I said.

"Of course," he nodded, a hint of condescension in his smile. "Any time. Constable."

I found Clayton around the side of the lodge, scowling at the snowmobiles parked nose-out toward the forest. Three brand-new Ski-doo Safari Grands, sleek as torpedoes on skis and twice as expensive. "You know how to run one of these things?" he asked.

"Just climb on and point the way," I said, straddling the nearest machine. I flicked the key and the motor thrummed to life.

Clayton slid cautiously onto the seat behind me. "Follow the fenceline north and stay on the track," he shouted in my ear. I tweaked the thumb throttle and the Safari eased into motion like a Rolls Royce in low gear.

The sky was gunmetal gray and overcast with a promise of snow, temperature in the low twenties. On a good trail with a full tank, the Safari could run halfway to Montreal at sixty miles per, but neither of us was dressed for serious snowmobiling and I kept the speed around fifteen miles per hour to minimize the risk of frostbite.

And to allow conversation.

"You don't like Tolzdorf much, do you?" I shouted above the hum of the machine. "What's his story?"

"Moved up here from Detroit a couple of years ago. Built the Big Bear for his Motown buddies. Acts like Mr. Moneybags and expects everybody to kiss his butt. Humps his way through anything in skirts, whether they're willin' or not, I hear, although we've never had a formal complaint. And you're right. I don't like him much."

"Acts like Mr. Moneybags?"

"I hear the contractor that built the Big Bear for him had a tough time collectin' his money, and so does everybody else that does business with him, includin' his hired help. There's a lotta land for sale around here, but he only bought the forty acres the Big Bear sits on and leased the rest from the Council on the cheap. I guess the Bear's makin' money for him, but I don't think he'd be so fat and happy if it wasn't. Stretched pretty thin, I hear."

"You hear a lot," I said.

"Small town. Everybody knows everybody's business. Follow that trail to the right."

I swung the Ski-doo over, slowing it as we started to climb. We were entering the southernmost foothills of the Porcupine Mountains, gentle, snow-cov-

ered slopes, lightly timbered with aspen and pine. The trail slanted gradually upward along the eastern bank of a narrow ridge, leveling out as we neared the crest. And then it ended.

I shut down the Ski-doo. Clayton climbed off, slapping his palms together to get the circulation going.

"Body was over this way," he said, starting down a narrow path trampled in the knee-deep snow. "Area got stomped down some when we picked up the body, but Cy photographed it before we touched anything. You can probably get copies if you want."

I followed him down the path, glancing around. The crest of the ridge was narrow, roughly twenty yards across at its widest point, and on a clear day you could probably see for miles in any direction, swampy tableland to the south, forested hill country east and west, and the Porcupines to the north. Even today, with scattered snowflakes beginning to drift down out of the soft gray haze, visibility was good for a mile or more.

"He was settin' here next to the rim," Clayton said, indicating a trampled area shielded by stacked juniper boughs. "When he got hit, he fell over the edge and slid down the slope maybe ten feet before he tangled in

them jack pines. Had a helluva time gettin' him back up here."

I looked the site over. Arnie Keefer's last hours were marked by a few cigarette butts, a crumpled Hershey bar wrapper, and a fine crimson mist on the snow where the bullet had blown through him. It wasn't a perfect spot, but the junipers would cut the wind and the view of the valley below was adequate.

It looked like good deer country. The valley was roughly eighty yards across, narrowing to a notch at the north end where the two ridges converged, and even at this distance I could see the deep deer trail in the snow at the foot of the ridge. Dozens of them apparently passed through this valley, moving down to the lowlands to feed.

"The kid's blind is across the valley," Clayton said, pointing to a stand of cedar at the base of the opposite ridge. "The buck was out in the middle there, almost directly between the two blinds. Kid opened up on him, one shot went high, and good-bye Arnie. Never did have much luck." He groped inside his uniform jacket, retrieved a thin metal flask, and took a short pull. He pointedly replaced the cap without offering me any, but I barely noticed. A vague sense of unease was tugging at

the corner of my subconscious. I guess I'd been feeling it since I examined the body, but I'd ignored it, writing it off to the company I was keeping. I couldn't ignore it any more. I couldn't put my finger on what was bugging me about the body, but as I looked around, I realized it didn't matter. This setup was wrong. All wrong.

The jack pines growing on the side of the ridge partially obscured the deer trail below, making the shooting tricky from this point. Keefer would have had a clear field of fire if he'd built his blind a little farther along the ridge. Why didn't he? And if Clayton and I could see the boy's blind from here . . .

"Was Keefer a good hunter?" I asked.

"He wasn't a hotshot trophy hunter like Tolzdorf, maybe, but he knew his way around the woods. Probably kept venison in his freezer year round, if you know what I mean. A lot of folks around here poach deer out of season. As long as they don't try to peddle it, we usually look the other way."

I nodded, wondering if looking the other way was habit-forming.

"What happened to Keefer's hat?" I asked. "He wasn't wearing one in the ambulance."

"It came off when he fell down the slope," Clayton said,

frowning. "I stuffed it inside his coat. A black watchcap. He wasn't wearing anything orange, if that's what you're wonderin'. The kid couldn't see him up here. In that camouflage jacket, he woulda been damn near invisible."

"Deer are color blind," I said absently, and regretted it immediately.

"They're what?"

"Color blind," I admitted. "At this distance, camo wouldn't make any difference to the deer."

"Yeah, but he wasn't just hidin' from the deer," Clayton snapped. "He was trespassin', too. If you look down the other side you can see where he crossed the damn fence."

"I only meant—"

"I don't give a shit what you meant! Look, this was an accident, nothin' more. We may be small town cops, Geronimo, but we know our jobs, and besides, I know that kid. I ain't got much use for Indians, and I'm likin' 'em less every minute, but that kid's all right. So don't be tryna do a Sherlock Holmes and make a big deal outa this."

"Right," I said, turning away.

"Where do you think you're goin'?"

"Down to the valley floor to take a look around."

"No, you're not. Cy told me to show you the site. Okay, you've seen it, and now we're

goin' back. I'm tired of freezin' my ass off up here."

"Go on ahead if you want," I said, starting down the uneven path toward the field below. "I'll catch up to you. Oh, and ah—" I wiggled the keys to the Ski-doo from my fingertips a moment before dropping them in my pocket, "have a nice walk."

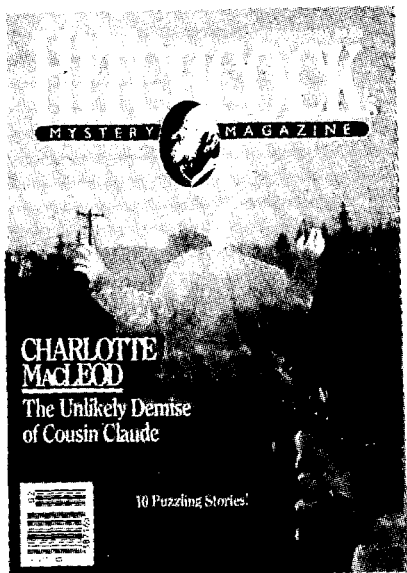
I could hear him cursing all the way down. Pretty standard stuff. No imagination.

From the ridge above I'd thought the valley was good deer country. I was wrong. It was the best I'd ever seen. As I moved through the pines at the foot of the ridge, every third or fourth tree was a "rub," its bark savagely scraped away by the horns of a buck, marking its territory and warning off rivals. Some of the trees were five or six inches in diameter, indicating a very large deer. And a few had been torn out by the roots. I've had no taste for hunting since I came home from Vietnam, but no one who's ever hunted could see those rubs without feeling the breathing go shallow and the blood quicken.

I found the deer trail at the base of the ridge and backtracked it to the spot where the kid's buck had left it and headed out onto the valley floor. The tracks were narrow and evenly

spaced to that point, but then grew larger, the hooves splaying as his stride had lengthened. The buck had bolted, but not up the ridge into the trees. He'd sprinted into the open. There was only one reason he'd do that, and it was written in the faint line in the snow behind each right front hoofprint as I tracked him toward the churned, bloody patch where he died. He was dragging his foreleg. Brandt and Clayton had assumed the kid had fired on the buck where they found the carcass. He hadn't. He'd shot it when it was still on the trail, and the mortally wounded animal had bolted, blindly covering the last fifty yards in a half dozen strides before pitching headlong into the snow.

I circled the area where the buck died, gauging the distance from the kid's blind to the spot where the buck had been hit. It was at least a hundred yard shot. The casualty report said the kid's gun was a '98 Springfield, an old military surplus rifle obsolete since T.R. had charged up San Juan Hill. And the worm of uneasiness that had been chewing on me since Onagon crawled into the open. The wounds. Both Keefer and the buck had been hit in approximately the same place, dead center, near the heart. A hundred yard hit with an old



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weapon on a moving deer was a good shot. Was the one that blew Keefer off the ridge an unhappy coincidence? Or an even better shot?

I didn't like the way this was shaping up at all, but if the killing wasn't an accident, what the hell was it?

They were alone out here. If anyone else had been in the area, their tracks would have been visible from Keefer's ridge, and I hadn't spotted any. Tolzendorf said the hunters were widely separated over the Big Bear, a logical setup and one I had no reason to doubt. Judging from the story written in the snow, unless somebody'd buzzed by in a helicopter to punch Keefer's ticket, the only things moving in the valley this morning were the kid, Keefer, and the buck. And two of them wouldn't be leaving any more tracks.

I walked thoughtfully toward the blind. It looked familiar as an old friend, a small plywood shelter built within a stand of cedar with boughs piled around it to break its profile. I've hunted from quite a few just like it. Clayton was right about one thing, the kid wouldn't have seen Keefer from here, but Keefer probably should have seen him, or at least the outline of the blind. Depending, of course, on how drunk he was.

I rummaged around inside and found an empty cartridge, 30-40 Krag. An uncommon caliber. The '98 Springfield's one of the few guns chambered for it. But I only found one.

I backtracked out of the blind, concentrating on the area a few feet to the right of the path, and spotted the tiny hole in the snow where the second empty'd fallen when it was ejected. The kid's tracks were oddly blurred near it. Maybe he'd stumbled, and fired accidentally. And punched a bull's-eye through a guy eighty yards away. And maybe the Pequots still own Manhattan Island. I retrieved the second empty and started back toward Keefer's ridge.

It was deserted. For a moment I thought Clayton had actually tried to hike back to the lodge, but then I spotted his tracks, slanting off to the northeast. "Clayton?"

"Over here. Come on, I want to show you something."

He was sitting on a stump on a narrow promontory. The view north and east was spectacular, rolling timbered hills as far as the eye could see. I felt a catch in my throat as I realized I was looking out over the tribal lands. Eighty thousand acres. Indian country. Wolf country.

"You find anything down there, Sherlock?"

"I, ah, no," I said, "not really. You wanted to show me something?"

"Yeah. Look over there, to the south. You see that roof?"

"Just barely. What is it?"

"Keefer's farmhouse. He had a couple hundred acres. His north fenceline marks the boundary of the Chippewa land grab."

"You mean the tribal lands," I said evenly.

"Whatever. Now, if it wasn't snowin' and you looked a little northeast of Keefer's, you'd see another roof. Another farm. Six hundred and forty acres. The Clayton place. My daddy's place."

I nodded slowly, staring into the snowy haze. "Your dad's farm is part of the tribal lands now?"

"That's right. Part of the land grab. Gone."

"Nobody was evicted," I said; "only land that had reverted to the state was ceded back to the tribes. Your daddy should have paid his taxes."

"Like I told you before, he was sick," he said bitterly. "I didn't find out about it till they delivered the legal notice to the damn rest home. I had the money, went to the Council. Their lawyers wouldn't even talk to me. Nothing I could do about it, they said."

"Tough break," I admitted,

"but that's how it goes. Your dad really didn't own the land any more. The state did."

"The damn Chips stole it," he said flatly, "Puredee simple. Maybe it was legal, but it wasn't right. They stole it off a sick old man."

"They acquired it legally," I said, "through the courts after twenty years of wrangling. But if you figure you got ripped off, maybe there's something I can do."

"Like what?"

"Put up a plaque for you."

"What?"

"A plaque. They're all over the state. This tribe used to live here, that one there. Ojibwa, Potawatomi. When the whites drove us out or killed us off, sometimes they put up a plaque, or named a county or a baseball team after us. Fair is fair. I don't think I can get 'em to rename a county, but maybe they'll put up a plaque if you want."

"My dad don't need a plaque," Clayton said, getting slowly to his feet. "He's already got one. Over at Onagon Evergreen. Dack Clayton, veteran of World War II and Korea. Rest in Peace. And, mister, you just lipped off one time too many." He set his uniform cap on the stump and began unbuckling his gunbelt.

And here it comes, I thought, not really surprised. I'd been

half expecting something since we left Onagon. I wasn't looking forward to it. Clayton was about my height, six even, but he had me by forty pounds, most of it in his chest and shoulders.

I glanced around casually for a weapon. Nothing looked handy, so I waited until he had both hands busy with his buckle, then stepped in quickly and suckerpunched him.

It was a good shot, a straight right to the jaw that caught him completely off guard. I followed it with two stiff jabs to the midsection and another solid right. His knees wobbled a moment, and then he went down in a heap. And shook his head. And got up again. And suddenly I had an inkling of how Custer felt when he topped that bluff at Little Big Horn.

I tried the quick right again, but he was ready this time. He brushed it aside and bored in. It was like scuffling with a building. I think I was quicker, but footwork doesn't mean much in kneedeep snow. We circled each other, sparring ineffectively, and then I ducked when I shouldn't have. He caught me with an overhand right to the forehead, and it was my turn to go down.

I got up immediately, but somehow, in the split second I was out, he'd managed to put

his hat and gunbelt back on, sit down on the stump, and smoke half a cigarette.

"Hm emmf?" I said.

He stared at me curiously, and took a drag from his cigarette.

I shook my head and tried again. "You had enough?"

"I can wait a while for round two," he said. "How about you?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Never better." I knelt in the snow, scooped up a double handful, and held it against the knot on my forehead. Clayton had a dark welt along his jawline, but somehow I didn't find that much comfort. I glanced around the clearing, looking for my hat, and spotted it in the snow just outside the ring we'd trampled. The trampled area looked oddly familiar, like the area near the kid's blind. Exactly like it, in fact. Or maybe I'd suffered brain damage. I got unsteadily to my feet.

"You about ready to start back?" Clayton asked.

"Almost," I said. "I want to take one more quick look over the valley."

"Jesus H. Christ—"

"I'll just be a minute," I said quickly, "you go on ahead. I'll meet you at the snowmobile." I started back down the path toward Keefer's blind before he could give me any more static.

A minute was all it took. They were in the deep snow, a

few feet to the right of the blind, invisible unless you knew they were there. Two more empty cartridges. Forty-four magnum this time.

We left the Ski-doo at the lodge and drove back to Onagon in the squad car. Clayton's driving was less frenzied than on the way out, but not much. On the other hand, maybe bouncing around helped. A few things began to fall into place.

"Keefer's wife," I said. "You said she'd gone on to better things. When was this?"

"Last spring, I guess," Clayton replied cautiously. "Why?"

"Was Tolzdorf one of the better things she went on to?"

"Maybe at first," he said, "but not for long, and she went through a couple more before she packed it in and moved down to Saginaw. You're barkin' up the wrong tree if you figure Tolzdorf put the kid up to anything. It wasn't a big thing with him and Mrs. Keefer, and the kid wouldn't go for anything outa line anyway. Bobby's a good kid."

And a helluva shot, too, I thought. "Are any more of Mrs. Keefer's boyfriends still around?"

"No, one's workin' over at Iron Mountain and the other'n got a job down in Flint at Buick."

"Is there anybody in this country you don't know about?" I said, shaking my head.

"Not many," he admitted. "Small towns, everybody knows everybody's business."

"Yeah," I said slowly, "I suppose they do, don't they."

Brandt's house was a rambling white ranch that looked like it had been assembled over the years, one room at a time. Clayton parked beside the sheriff's patrol car. Brandt stepped out on the porch in his stocking feet, sipping a cup of coffee. His smile faded as we crossed the neatly shoveled drive.

"Lee," he said evenly, "you go on in the house. Kathy's got the coffee on. I want a word with the constable here. Alone."

Clayton did as he was told without a word. He glanced back at me from the doorway, and I nodded before the door closed quietly behind him.

"All right," Brandt said coldly, "what the hell happened out there?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's rough country. We fell down. A couple of times. It wasn't anybody's fault. No complaints."

"Fair enough," he nodded. "Were you satisfied with things out there? Can we wrap this up?"

"I think so. I'd like to talk to

the boy first, though. Privately, if you don't mind."

"I guess it'll be all right, but damnit, don't push him. He's had a rough time. Come on in."

The kitchen was a mob scene, with Clayton, the LaPlaunt boy and his mother, and three kids of grade-school age gathered around a table littered with coffee cups and breakfast wreckage. The sheriff's wife, a buxom, wide-shouldered brunette with an honest smile and go-to-hell eyes, was piling Clayton's plate with ham and scrambled eggs and carrying on simultaneous conversations with Mrs. LaPlaunt and two of the kids. It was a warm, genial room, filled with morning light and the scents of good cooking, past and present. I felt some of the tension that had been building in me since I'd unzipped the body bag start to recede. Until I met the boy's eyes across the table and read the fear in them.

Brandt spoke quietly to the boy and his mother. She scowled at me, but he apparently reassured her. She nodded her assent, and the boy rose. But I could feel her eyes on my back as we followed Brandt down a narrow hallway to his den. The sheriff grasped my arm a moment before he left us. "Remember, easy," he said.

I nodded, closed the door

carefully behind him, and turned to face Robert LaPlaunt.

The boy was a little taller than he'd seemed sitting down, five seven or eight, with a coltish build, hands and feet too big for the rest of him. His eyes were a deep brown, partly hidden by the unruly shock of raven-black hair across his forehead. He stood in the center of the room, his feet wide apart, scared to death but not giving an inch. A ninety-eight pound warrior in an oversized orange hunting suit.

"My name is Delacroix," I said, "Tony Delacroix. I'm one of the constables appointed by the Chippewa Council to police the new tribal lands."

"I don't think I have to talk to you," he said slowly.

"No, you don't. But you should. I give you my word, I'm not your enemy. What do they call you? Robert? Bob?"

The boy said nothing.

"All right, Robert, why don't we clear the air. These men, Brandt and Clayton, they're good cops, but they don't hunt so they don't read sign. I do. So I know what happened out there was no accident. I know Keefer shot at you, and he must have fired first because after you fired he couldn't do any more shooting. What I don't understand is why. Why would he shoot at you?"

"God, I don't know," the kid said helplessly, his shoulders slumping. "I didn't even know him. I mean, I seen him around, but . . . I don't know why."

"What happened? Exactly."

"I walked out to the blind in the dark. First light the buck come down the run. A big one, he ah . . . God."

"It's okay. Take your time."

He nodded, swallowing. "I waited till the buck's in range, and then I fired. He ah, he didn't go down right away. He ran maybe forty, fifty yards toward me before he fell. I know to wait ten minutes to be sure, but I didn't. I knew it was dead. So I left the blind and walked toward the buck and," he took a deep breath, "and somebody shot at me. It was really close, I heard it whip by my head. So I hollered and hit the dirt—the snow, I mean. I'm yellin' my head off, figurin' it's somebody doesn't know the deer is dead. Except then I see him up on the ridge, and he stands up and aims and shoots again, and this one's so close it kicked snow in my face. So I shot back, and ah . . ." His voice thickened, and he released a ragged breath. "He fell over the edge, and got tangled in a jack pine. I mean, he was just hangin' there. Upside down. I could see his face . . . God, I never meant to kill him. I swear! I was scared

and mad, but—"

"It's not your fault," I said quietly. "You had no choice. Keefer's blind wasn't in the right place for hunting deer. He was hunting you. And he was a good hunter. If he hadn't been drunk up there, you'd be dead now and I'd be talking to him."

"But why? Why would he shoot at me?"

"I don't know. He had a lot of trouble in his life lately. Some of his neighbors lost land to the tribes, maybe he blamed you for it, maybe he was just crazy. It doesn't matter now. It's over. The only evidence was in the snow, and by nightfall that'll be covered. Does anybody else know what really happened?"

"Only my mother and Mr. Tolzdorf."

"Tolzdorf?"

"He was at the lodge when I got there. I told him what happened and he said we should call the sheriff but . . . he said it would be better if I told them it was an accident, that people might not believe me about Keefer shooting at me first. He said they might send me to jail because I'm an Indian. I didn't like to lie about it, but—" Again the helpless shrug. Sixteen years old and growing up much too fast. "Was it wrong to lie?"

"No," I sighed, "I'm afraid it wasn't. We get a half dozen shooting accidents a year, and

usually no one's blamed. But a gunfight? No, Tolzdorf was right. It's better to leave it this way. It's over now." I slipped an arm around his shoulders and felt him relax. A little. My guess about his weight was wrong. He was probably closer to ninety pounds than ninety-eight. The oversized coat made him seem . . .

"Bob," I said casually, "this coat. Where did you get it?"

He told me, and then we walked out to the kitchen together and I signed Brandt's papers. Accidental Hunting Fatality.

Clayton gave me a lift back to Onagon afterward. Neither of us had much to say. He kept his speed down to roughly ten miles over the limit, dodging hunter/pedestrians with what I had to concede was a modicum of skill. His driving, like a lot of things about him, took a little getting used to. He made a kamikaze left turn in front of an oncoming station wagon, and powerslid neatly to a halt beside my pickup truck.

"Just a minute," he said, as I opened the door.

He kept both hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead. "I, ah—look, thanks for not sayin' anything to Cy about what happened out to the Big

Bear. He's a hardnose about stuff like that. It coulda cost me my job."

"Forget it," I said. "I swung first."

"I ain't forgot that," he said, "but you coulda screwed me and you didn't, and I ain't forgettin' that either."

"Tell you what," I offered, "why don't we make round two a couple of beers. I'll buy."

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "In fact, I'd rather do a taste test on a urine sample than drink a beer with you."

"It's been a pleasure working with you, too," I sighed. "Gosh, I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to get back to Marquette. I've got a report to make."

Which wasn't quite true. After Clayton roared off like the northwoods' answer to A.J. Foyt, I climbed into my pickup and drove back out to the Big Bear Lodge.

I parked in front of the log fortress, then reached down and retrieved the Colt AR-15 carbine I carry cased under the seat. I slapped a clip into it, checked the safety, then slid it back into the carrying case to protect it from the snow. Then I climbed out and walked around to the side of the lodge.

Two of the snowmobiles were gone. I climbed aboard the third,

a Ski-doo Safari like the others, fired it up, and gunned it back down the trail along the fence line. The snow had been falling steadily for hours now, and the tracks we'd left earlier were blurred and softened. But not the track I was following. It was fresh, less than an hour old.

A mile or so into the forest it veered west, away from the trail to Keefer's ridge, and entered the valley on the opposite side. I followed it along the foot of the ridge to a clump of cedars twenty yards behind the kid's blind. A snowmobile was parked there, concealed with cedar boughs. I slid the Colt out of its case and gunned the Ski-doo out on the valley floor, swinging it around to face the blind. We stared at each other through the cedar boughs piled across the opening, and then Tolzdorf carefully set his rifle aside and climbed out.

"Constable," he said, "I thought you people were done out here. If I'd known you weren't . . ."

"We are, sort of," I said, "and there's no reason you shouldn't be here. It's your blind, isn't it?"

"There are a lot of blinds on the Big Bear," he said evenly. "They're all mine."

"Maybe, but this one's special. The big bucks come down off the Porcupines and move through this valley. Trophy

bucks, like the one you shot last year. I thought this blind looked familiar when I first saw it. It was in the background of the photo you showed me."

"Maybe it was," he frowned. "So what?"

"So why weren't you in it this morning? Opening day?"

"It was the boy's first season, and—"

"Nuts. He could have hunted from any blind on the place, but you put him in this one. Yours. Because Onagon's a small town and you heard your redneck neighbor was still ticked off at you for borrowing his wife and forgetting to send her back. You knew Keefer poached, so he probably knew about this blind, and he had a mean streak. So why take a chance? You've hunted big game. You know all about bait. So you lent the kid your coat, put him in your blind, and waited back at the lodge to see what happened. And the boy got lucky. Keefer was so drunk he missed him. Barely."

"Even if what you're saying is true," he said guardedly, "there's nothing illegal about it. I didn't break any laws."

"True enough," I conceded, "or at least no white man's laws. But you used one of the People for bait. I don't think the Council will let that pass. I think they'll revoke your lease. I wonder how much that phony

fort of yours will be worth when you've only got forty acres to hunt on."

"But this is all just supposition. They'd never take your word over mine, you're—"

"Only an Indian?" I smiled. "You know, Tolzdorf, just this once, I don't think that's going to give you much of an edge."

"My God, you can't be serious. Do you think I'll just lay down for this? If you people try to renege on that lease, I'll sue you from here to breakfast."

"That's your prerogative," I shrugged, "but of course the Council keeps a law firm on permanent retainer, and nobody knows more about broken promises than they do. Nobody. And we're a patient people. It took us a hundred and fifty years to win this land back. How long can you afford to fight? I hear you're stretched pretty thin."

That last shot struck home. I could see it in his eyes. And I read something else there as well. I swung the muzzle of the Colt around to cover him. "You know, I'm glad we had this little talk, but I've got miles to go still, and I'd better get started. First, though, you hand me your rifle. Carefully. You're all through hunting on Indian land."

He picked up his rifle, a customized Weatherby Mark, nat-

urally, and passed it to me, butt first. I laid it gently across my lap, a big mistake because I took my eyes off Tolzdorf a moment to do it and when I looked up again I was staring down the barrel of a snub-nosed .38.

"Handy thing to have," he said conversationally. "I carry it to finish off wounded game without messing up the pelts. Now hand my rifle back, and yours, too. Carefully," he added, with a rictus of a smile.

"Don't be stupider than you've been already," I said, passing the weapons to him. "Brandt knows I'm out here."

"You know, I don't believe he does. If you'd told him your suspicions, he would've had to charge Bobby with something, possibly murder. So I'm betting you didn't tell him, and I'm a gambling man. I've staked everything I own on the Big Bear, so one more bet won't make much difference. If I lose it, I'm finished anyway."

"What do you think you're going to do?"

"We're going for a ride, you and I," he said, straddling the seat behind me, pressing the revolver into the small of my back. "We're going into the tribal lands. A machine like this can cover more ground in a couple of hours than a man can walk in a week, so I'm betting you won't make it out of

there. You'll just disappear in the snow. If I'm wrong I won't be much worse off than I am now. Let's go. Carefully," he added. I couldn't see his smile, but somehow I knew it was there.

I gunned the Ski-doo cautiously into motion, keeping the speed just under twenty. I was in no hurry and I didn't want to spook my passenger. I didn't doubt for a second that he was capable of killing me. What I did doubt was that he intended to risk letting me walk out. He'd leave me somewhere in the tribal lands, but not alive.

Still, there's a saying among the People, "It's as good a day as any to die." I outgrew the idea that I was immortal in Vietnam, and if today was my day, I was in the right place for it. Even through the steadily increasing snowfall the country was magnificent, a maze of broken ridges and rolling hills, thickly wooded with silver birch and aspen. The chill air was heavy with the tang of cedar and pine, sweet enough to drink. It was easy to relax, to let my spirit drift in the sight and scent of it, and in the first hour I did exactly that, but only because I was certain Tolzdorf would wait until the Big Bear was miles behind us before he wasted me.

But in the second hour, I knew my safety margin was running out. We'd covered over twenty miles, far enough for his purposes, and with darkness coming on, it could happen any time. And then the land made the decision for me.

We came to a small stream, partially frozen over. It didn't look deep, but snowmobiles don't swim very well, and I swung the Ski-doo to the right along the bank. It slanted gradually upward, we were in the foothills of the Porcupines now, and I suddenly sensed that this was the place. The bank was narrow and sloped sharply down to the stream bed. It was only an eight foot drop, but it would have to be enough. I increased the pressure on the Safari's thumb-throttle, and it gave a little surge as we approached the crest of the ridge.

"Hey," Tolzdorf said, "just keep it—"

That was all he had time for. I jammed the throttle wide open and the Ski-doo bolted the last few feet like a startled buck and leapt into space. I threw myself off to the right, grasping desperately at the scrawny branches of a jack pine as the machine cartwheeled down the bank into the stream. A branch broke off in my hand and I slid a few feet down, scrambling and scraping for purchase in

the snow, trying to get over the crest of the ridge before Tolzdorf recovered. I almost made it.

He was very quick for a big man. Too quick. He slid off the rear of the snowmobile and tumbled down the bank, shoulders tucked like an expert. He splashed into the stream a few feet behind the Ski-doo, but he was on his feet again almost immediately, blazing away at me in the fading light. And he was lucky. Or I wasn't.

A mailed fist hammered my left shoulder as I reached the crest, slamming me over the top and spilling me down the other side. I lay still for a moment, dazed, gasping for breath, and then I made myself move, crawling on my belly as quickly as I could back to the track left by the Ski-doo. After twenty yards or so, a clump of juniper loomed up on my right, and I risked a look back.

Tolzdorf was still standing in the shallow water, trying to spot me, but he was looking where I'd been, not where I was now. The Ski-doo was a few feet beyond him, upside down and half-buried in the stream bed. They're tough machines, but that one wasn't going anywhere ever again.

I slithered another twenty

yards, then staggered to my feet and stumbled down the trail. When I looked back again, I couldn't see Tolzdorf at all through the curtain of falling snow.

I guessed that we'd covered roughly about twenty miles on the trip out. The ache in my shoulder was bone deep and my legs felt wobbly, but if I could just manage to stay on the snowmobile track and keep moving through the night, I figured I had at least a fifty-fifty chance of seeing the morning.

Tolzdorf had no chance at all. Even if he could find the track, he was soaking wet, and the temperature would tumble with the dusk into the low teens. He wouldn't last more than a few hours.

And maybe not that long. A little while after nightfall, I thought I heard the muffled report of a revolver.

One shot.

But maybe it was only the wind. It can play tricks on you as it rustles through the frozen forest in the darkness. It can rush like a ghostly waterfall, or whisper your name with the voice of a long dead friend. And a couple of times . . .

A couple of times during that never-ending night, I could have sworn I heard wolves.

UNSOLVED

by
Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

You may recall that colorful island where there are three races, indistinguishable save in respect of their attitude towards the truth. A Blue always answers a question truthfully; a White always lies; a Pink, answering two or more questions, tells the truth and lies alternately; his first answer, however, may be either truthful or otherwise.

A visitor to the islands approached a group of three natives, whose names were Mr. Pink, Mr. White, and Mr. Blue. One was known to be a Pink, one a White, one a Blue. Taking Mr. Pink aside, the visitor put some questions to him.

"Mr. Pink," he said, "are you the Pink, the White, or the Blue?"

"I am the Pink, sir."

"And Mr. White?"

"He is the White."

"So Mr. Blue is the Blue?"

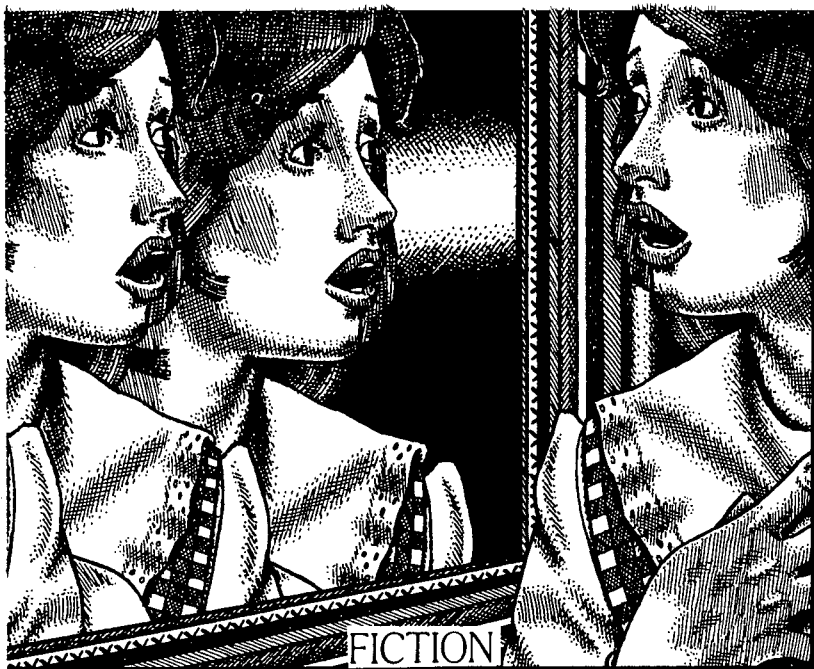
"Obviously."

Is Mr. Blue the Blue? If not, what is he?

See page 113 for the solution to the August puzzle.

"Pink, White, and Blue," taken from *My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning* by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban").
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Tommajeane, Tommajeane

by Taylor McCafferty

Sitting here in my living room, watching TV with my husband Will, I can hardly believe my sister's in prison. Serving a life sentence yet.

I guess Tommajeane was serving a life sentence long before they put her in prison. She only had fifteen years of ordinary life. That was all. Fifteen years of having friends, of being her parents' pampered darling, of just being normal. Then suddenly it was over. For good.

It was on Tommajeane's fifteenth birthday that she started doing the thing that scared everybody so much. That must be over twenty years ago, but I can still see her so clearly, sitting there at the head of the table that day, waiting to blow out her candles. We'd just finished dinner—Tommajeane's favorite, fried chicken—and Papa had gone out to shoo the cows into the barn while Mama was putting the candles on Tommajeane's cake. So Tommajeane was just sitting there, beaming at me and Mama, wearing that calico dress

Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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with the lace at the collar that Mama had just made her. Back then store-bought clothes were just fine for me, but for Tommajeau, Mama would sew for hours.

The back door slammed, and Papa came in, dusting off his overalls. He started to walk right to Tommajeau. Then he stopped and just stared at her. His face suddenly looked like it was carved out of soap. White soap. He kinda stammered, like something was caught in his throat, "Tommajeau—I just saw you. Outside."

Mama laughed, a nervous little bird noise crackling around us. "Aw, Tom, now hush. Tommajeau ain't been out of this here room," she said, with a wave of her hand.

"Naw," Papa said, shaking his head and dragging out the word until it sounded like a curse. Then he turned back to Tommajeau, looking at her like she was a roach. "Tommajeau, you just spoke to me out there. I asked why you weren't in the house no more. And you said you needed some air."

Tommajeau turned to Mama, a pout forming on her pretty mouth. "Mama, make him stop."

Papa was getting red in the face with nobody believing him or nothing. So he said, biting out the words, "Okay, okay. I'll show you. Come on."

He trooped us all out to the back door and pointed through the screen. He didn't have to point, though, because we could all plainly see Tommajeau out there on the back porch, moving back and forth on the swing. Sitting there in the same calico dress she was wearing standing right next to me.

My stomach started doing flipflops. And after that everything seemed a little off center. Like Mama, for instance. She turned to Tommajeau and said, "Now, girl, you cut that out right this minute!" Like what Tommajeau was doing was about as ordinary as talking with your mouth full.

That probably was the first time in Tommajeau's life that Mama had ever actually raised her voice to her, but Tommajeau didn't act like she even heard her. She was too busy staring wild-eyed at the thing on the porch.

"Do you see that? Do you see that?" she kept saying, looking around at the three of us. Her voice threatened to go off into a solid scream.

Mama grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a good shake. "Now, Tommajeau, you stop it! Stop it now!" At the time I wasn't sure if Mama meant for Tommajeau to stop yelling, or to stop doing whatever she was doing out there on the porch. If Mama meant

the screaming, then Tommajean was being her usual good self. She hushed up right away. If Mama, however, meant the other thing, then Tommajean was being bad. Real, real bad. For the better part of an hour she sat outside on the porch swing—and inside on one of the dining room chairs—while Mama and Papa yelled at the both of her.

I didn't yell, though. I was too afraid that if I opened my mouth, everybody would hear the delight in my voice.

Even now, so many years later, I still feel guilty about how much I enjoyed that first time Tommajean was "bad." It felt like an event I'd been waiting my whole life to see. I was only two years older than Tommajean, but in all my seventeen years there hadn't been a single minute I could remember when Tommajean wasn't The Perfect Child. If Mama asked me once, she must've asked me a hundred times, "Lattie, why can't you be more like your sister?"

And I'd look at Tommajean, at that golden halo of curls framing her ivory face, at her tiny, tip-tilted nose, at those long-lashed green eyes, and I was sure that the reason she was so pretty was that God had used up all his ugly on me. My hair was ratty-brown and straight as a poker; my nose was a beacon in the middle of my face; and my eyes were dull brown with no lashes at all that you could see. I gained weight looking at food; Tommajean could eat a sundae every hour on the hour and still have the figure of a model. A starving model.

In school it was the same thing all over again. Tommajean made straight A's and hardly cracked a book. I studied all the time and barely managed to make C's. I'll admit it. Back then I wanted to hate Tommajean real bad. And, let's face it, she was a little spoiled. She'd had Mama and Papa doing handstands over her since the day she was born. It was pretty obvious they were nuts about her when they gave her *both* their names.

And Mama and Papa weren't the only ones nuts about Tommajean. Nearly every single guy in Pigeon Fork could be added to the list. From the thirteen-year-old bagboy at the grocery to forty-year-old Henry Westerman, who owned the farm next to ours. The phone rang constantly, and it was always some guy calling Tommajean. The one time a guy called me was to find out if Tommajean was dating anybody steady. I hung up on him.

So that first day was I enjoying Tommajean finally getting into trouble? You bet I was. It never occurred to me that here could be a problem that beauty and brains might not be able to conquer. I just assumed that somebody like Tommajean would find a way to

rise above a little thing like being in two places at once. I was so sure of it that I could actually enjoy all the fuss.

After a while I got tired of trying not to smile while Mama and Papa yelled at Tommajean in the dining room, so I went on out to the porch to talk to the other one. At first it made me feel real funny talking to her, but then she sounded exactly like Tommajean—and looked exactly like Tommajean—so after a while it just seemed as if you were just talking to Tommajean. Like normal. To this day I don't remember what we talked about. I do remember asking her, "Do you know there's another one of you in the dining room?" And she said, "Well, sure," in a tone implying that it was a stupid question. Which, come to think of it, was a tone the first Tommajean had used with me a lot back then.

After a little while longer I decided to touch her. You know, to see if my hand would go right through her like in some of those ghost movies I'd seen? I had been sitting on the porch steps directly in front of the swing, but as I got up to reach over for her, I must've taken my eyes off Tommajean for just a second. When I looked back, she was gone. The swing was still moving slightly, swaying back and forth; but it was now empty.

I felt a moment of real fear, like a sudden chill. Then I shook it off and went on into the dining room. "Tommajean, I got to hand it to you. That's a neat trick." I realized immediately I'd said the wrong thing. Three pairs of outraged eyes met mine.

After that Papa made us all promise not to tell a soul what we'd seen. And he made Tommajean promise never, never, never to do such a thing again. "But I'm not doing anything!" she sobbed. In the end she promised anyway. Not to do whatever it was she didn't know she was doing.

I think we all knew that was one promise Tommajean wouldn't be able to keep. It wasn't a week later that it happened again. And again. At school, at the grocery, and once outside of church. It didn't take long in a small town like Pigeon Fork before word was out on Tommajean. Half the town—the part that hadn't seen it with their own eyes—was saying the whole thing was baloney. The other half—you know which half that was—was insisting it was true.

And poor Tommajean. After a while that's how I thought of my beautiful sister—poor Tommajean. She wasn't quite as beautiful any more. Oh, she still had the same gorgeous features, but her big green eyes always looked a little haunted now. It's funny, but people who look scared all the time don't really look very pretty.

Even Mama and Papa started treating her different. There were no more handmade dresses. And every once in a while I'd catch them looking at her funny. Like maybe they were ashamed.

None of the guys at school ever asked Tommajean out any more. One day I heard a bunch of them, laughing and saying, "Yeah, but what if you were kissing Tommajean and the other one came up? What would you do then?" Snickering and jeering until I came up and kicked one of them in the ankle.

Those who didn't actually believe the stories about Tommajean still didn't take any chances. They all avoided her. Suddenly Tommajean's only friend was me.

We got real close. In fact, that might have been the only good thing that came out of this. We started really talking to each other. Neither of us mentioned Tommajean's problem for a long time. Then one night—right after she'd dropped out of high school—Tommajean told me what it was like.

"I just start feeling a little weak, and I know. That it's happened again. A part of me has gone somewhere else." Her eyes started looking real scared so I put my arm around her until she stopped shaking.

"Maybe it's a part you don't want anyway," I said.

Tommajean tried to smile through her tears. "Trouble is, nobody wants the part that's left."

I didn't have an answer for that. We sat in silence for a moment, and then I said, "It's going to be all right." But we both knew by then I was lying.

The next day we went and looked up Tommajean's problem at the town library. To sort of see what Tommajean was up against. We found it right away, in this book about supernatural goings-on. Astral projection is what them scientists call it. It seems like a lot of people meditate and do Lord knows what all just to be able to do what Tommajean could do without even trying. Tommajean must've been a natural. She could do it even when she was trying not to.

After she read that book on astral projection, Tommajean got better at it, though. She learned how to make it happen any time she wanted. Unfortunately, she never did learn the most important thing. How to make it stop.

After Tommajean gave up on high school, she tried to hold a job. But the same thing happened again and again. Somebody would run into the two of her, and she'd get fired. For scaring people.

That was a real bad time for Tommajean, I guess, those years

right after I graduated from high school and started working in that dress shop in town. I'd just met Will at a church social, and a lot of my time was being spent with him. Now my Will isn't the handsomest man in the world, but I knew when I met him, he was the one for me. He's real smart, too. He'd just joined the police force, and was already working toward making detective. I was right proud when he asked me to marry him.

I can see it now. How unhappy Tommajeau must've been back then, knowing I was leaving home soon. How lonely she must've been. But I was so happy I guess I wanted to believe that everybody else was, too. So when Tommajeau waltzed in one night right after she was fired from that fast food place—the third one in a row—and announced she was marrying Henry Westerman, I thought it was a good thing.

I guess I knew she didn't love him—but Henry was the only one who'd kept coming around even after Tommajeau's problem started. Back then it seemed like Henry didn't care if there were five hundred Tommajeaus as long as he got to marry one of them. I remember thinking he was kind of sweet. So what if he was twenty five years older than Tommajeau? He had a big farm and seemed well off. I'll never forget how relieved Mama and Papa looked when they heard the news. If I noticed how relieved they were, I don't know how Tommajeau could've missed it.

Anyway, after we both got married, I didn't see Tommajeau for quite a spell. Will and I moved into town so he'd be close to work. And then the kids came along and I got busy raising Will, Jr., and Becky Sue. Tommajeau and Henry were out on that farm of his. And the times I did see her, she didn't tell me nothing.

I didn't find out until after she was arrested that Henry had started beating her. It came out during the trial that Henry had never really believed all those tales about Tommajeau. But when they got married and he found out that those stories were true, he didn't take the news real well.

Sometimes I wonder when Tommajeau first decided to kill Henry. Of course, I knew she'd changed. You couldn't hardly miss that. Every once in a while, when we were alone, Tommajeau would talk about the dirty trick that life had played on her. And what could I say? She was right. I know I sure expected her life to turn out different, what with all she had going for her at the start.

I tried to talk to her about it one day when she was going on about what a crummy deal she'd gotten. I wanted her to know I understood so I hugged her and said, "I know how you must feel."

You'd have thought I'd lit a match under her. She pulled away, her eyes blazing. "How would you know how I feel? How could you possibly know?" Then she stomped out of the house, and I didn't see her again for months.

After that, believe you me, I just kept my mouth shut around Tommajean about all her problems. Even when I noticed what an old miser that Henry was. Shoot, everybody noticed that. Everybody in Pigeon Fork knew that Henry had thousands in the bank, but did he spend any of it on his pretty wife? Not on your life. After a few years Tommajean started looking like she got all her clothes at rummage sales. I know that must've hurt her pride. It must've been one more hurt on top of all the other hurts. That and her finding out that Henry was keeping that other woman in a real nice apartment in town. Shoot, when I heard that at the trial I felt like killing Henry myself.

I guess Henry's dying must've seemed like the only way out for Tommajean. She couldn't leave Henry because she couldn't hold a job. So Henry's dying must've seemed like the only way for her to get back a little of what life had cheated her out of.

And when you think about it, Tommajean had the perfect alibi. She could always be seen somewhere else, when Henry was getting what he no doubt deserved. That, of course, was the problem right there. Probably if Tommajean had just flown into a rage and killed Henry with a skillet the very minute she heard about that cheap floozy in town, Tommajean might have been able to get off. On account of temporary insanity or something. But no, Tommajean planned it. She planned it real good.

That night she arranged to meet me and Will for dinner at the Deer Run Inn, the nicest restaurant in Pigeon Fork. Actually, the Deer Run isn't even in Pigeon Fork, but about forty miles away. It must've seemed perfect to Tommajean—some place far, far away from her and Henry's farm. And what could be a better alibi than having dinner with a police detective, even if it was your own brother-in-law?

I remember how surprised I was at Tommajean's calling up out of the blue and asking us out to dinner. But then she said, sounding a little like she was going to cry, "It sure is a shame how little we see of each other any more." I remember thinking that us not seeing each other was more Tommajean's doing than mine, but I didn't say anything. She kept sounding so funny, though, that I remember asking, "Is everything okay?"

Her answer was quick and sharp. "Sure it is. Everything's just

peachy." Then she gave a peculiar little laugh, and added, "Uh, Henry won't be coming. He's got something he's gotta do instead."

I'd heard the rumors by then, of course. About Henry's having somebody on the side. I figured that was probably the "something" Henry had to do, but I didn't say a thing. I just agreed to meet her.

It should've worked perfectly. Just about the time Will and I were pulling into the parking lot of the Deer Run, Tommajean was walking into her living room almost sixty miles away. Henry evidently was reading the paper, sitting in a big overstuffed chair next to the woodstove. From what Will told me, Tommajean just walked up with that old Winchester shotgun of Henry's and pulled the trigger. She'd stood real close—I guess she was making sure Henry didn't have a chance. Then she ran around real quick, turning things over, making it look like a break-in. She even took some of their stuff, a TV and radio, things like that. The police found it all later, hidden in the loft of the barn.

Minutes later, Will and I saw Tommajean walking into the Deer Run Inn. We'd just been seated; and I saw her come in, watched her walking slowly toward us. She was smiling, and I smiled back. Until I saw the red splatters all over the front of her dress.

Will saw them, too, and so did everybody around us. A kind of hush fell over the room. Tommajean stopped, and just stood there for a minute, looking dazed. Then she slowly looked down at her dress, and her mouth opened in a soundless scream. She turned and ran out.

Will took off after her. He was back just a minute later, though, his face grim. "She's gone, Lattie," he said. I nodded, just looking at him. "I've called the station. I think we're going to take a drive out to Henry's." I nodded again, unable to speak. I think we both knew even then what Will would find when they got there.

Will told me Tommajean was waiting for them when they pulled up. She was just sitting there on the porch, waiting. She didn't even try to deny what she'd done.

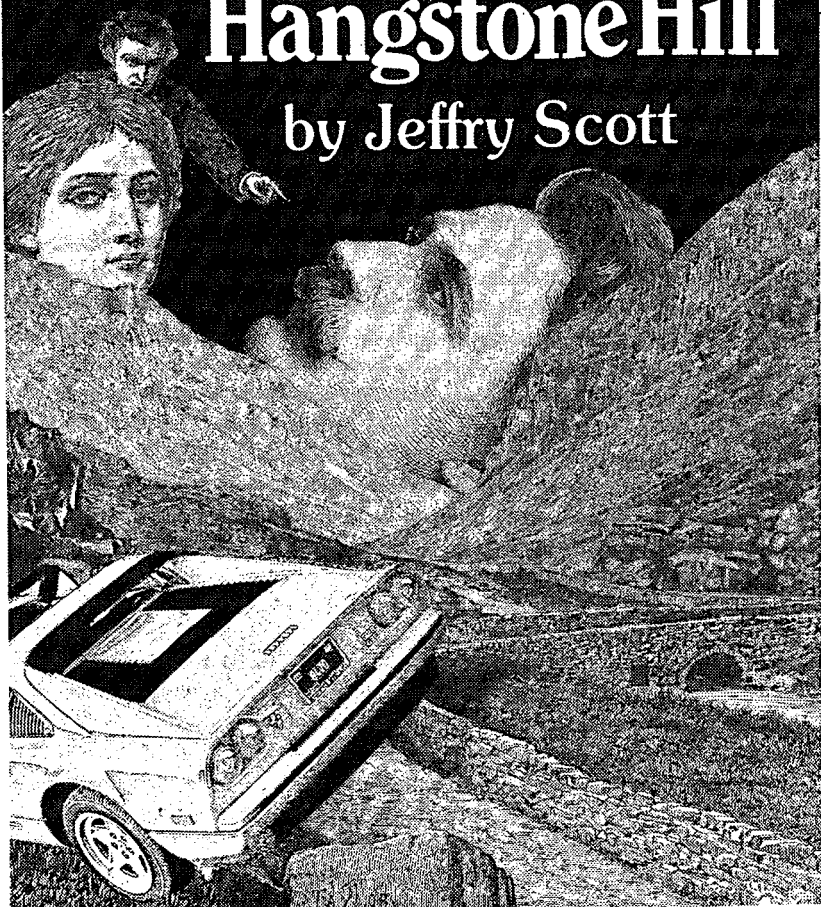
They tried to give her the death penalty for a while, but eventually it got worked down to a life sentence. Will says Tommajean will be up for parole in twenty years. If she behaves herself, and I think she will.

Like I said, it's hard to believe that my sister is actually in prison. It's particularly hard to believe when almost every night Tommajean's right here in my living room, sitting over there in that big easy chair, watching TV with me and Will.

FICTION

The Bride of Hangstone Hill

by Jeffry Scott



Though the official diagnosis was concussion, Adrian Macksey could not help seeing it differently. Suddenly a childhood riddle had

bite; he wondered where a candle flame went after being blown out. Macksey still didn't know but suspected that he had been there for a while.

Illustration by Jim Harter

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The doctor didn't urge him to buck up and be thankful for a narrow escape, but that was very much the unspoken text. It had been quite a crash and Macksey was lucky to be walking away after a single night's observation in Lackland general hospital. And yes, a measure of amnesia was par for the course . . .

Sara tended to scold fondly, archly, in the homeward cab. He'd scared the life out of her. A casualty department nurse had traced her through the phone number in the front of his pocket diary, bringing Sara to his bedside. "You kept asking who and where you were and it was no good my telling you, it didn't register, five minutes later you wanted to know exactly the same thing."

Wretchedly aware of the taxi driver eavesdropping, Adrian Macksey willed her to stop. A failure, since she prattled on, "Then you turned stuffy and shy—said you hadn't the faintest notion who I might be but there was this vague hunch we must be close. Was I wife, girlfriend, sister? At least you didn't have mother on the list."

"You could never be taken for anyone's mother," he smiled. But the lightness of mood was brief, he couldn't resist brooding. Macksey had always prided himself on being in control, as

much as a modern man can be. Upsetting to discover that the *me* of Adrian Macksey, as it were, could be made redundant for hours at a stretch, that a relatively strong person was pitifully frail, vulnerable.

After careering off the road at the bottom of that hill, he had behaved like a human machine operating without conscious will or decision. That was the point, he *had* been unconscious on his feet, working on automatic pilot. Walking miles from the scene of the crash, wandering Lackland's streets until an alert police constable sensed that the blank-faced pedestrian with the ripped jacket might need aid. Macksey lacked direct knowledge of all that, he had to take it on trust from helpful strangers with no reason for lying to him.

It was as if fate had turned two pages at once, skipping perhaps five hours of his life. Only it was more like a jump-cut in the movies—straight from going back to the lab in the evening to finding himself in hospital.

"I wish you'd stop banging on about it," Sara complained at last. "You're okay now. Anyone would think you were the first person in medical history to get knocked silly. *Boxers* don't make all this fuss, they're sensible, they put it behind them." Sara had been living with Adrian

Macksey for the best part of a year; in obvious, centerfold ways she was magnificent (a magnificent appetite for high living, though that was another matter) but he reflected with equal bitterness and guilt that physical facets aside, they might as well be strangers.

Not that Sara's reaction was unusual. As soon as friends knew he was out of the hospital, there were telephone calls and visits. He grew tired of concussion stories—including a surprising number of personal case histories—whose general thrust was downscaling and dismissive, arguing that what he'd experienced was no big deal.

Groff Hanson continued the treatment when Macksey returned to work. Probably Sara had briefed him on the sly, for Groff was her brother as well as Adrian Macksey's partner. "Good Lord, I collided with a goalpost at school and played the entire second half of a soccer match without knowing a thing about it! Utter zombie, you're *supposed* to be after a jolly good crack on the head, chum."

Macksey grumbled, "Lay off, I'm not saying I'm unique . . ."

Groff looked up from an unstable pile of printouts. "Well, what *are* you saying then? Between ourselves, it's getting on poor old Sara's nerves. Snap out

of it, thank your lucky stars you're not still in a coma, human vegetable and all that."

"Thanks."

"Well, don't turn into a whining hypochondriac is what I'm getting at." Groff Hanson's podgy fingers started dancing over his VDU terminal. "Get back to earning a living, eh? While I waste my time on trivialities like our cash flow." Taking the non-hint, Macksey wandered downstairs to the lab.

It was soothing to enter that long room, cluttered but less untidy than laid out to an idiosyncratic, mutually agreed system that worked for Adrian Macksey and Kiri Selars. Pleasant to watch Kiri pottering, dowdy, or workmanlike according to viewpoint, in wrinkled jeans and a sweater whose sleeves, forever catching on equipment, hung in ratty strands.

But when she turned, her pallid appearance, eyes set in shadows stark as bruises, took him aback. "You look terrible," he blurted.

"I was worr—I haven't been sleeping well." Kiri swallowed, looked away, then her chin came up and she snapped, "Why the hell didn't you fasten your seat belt before playing boy-racer on a notoriously bad stretch of road?"

"I *was* wearing it," Macksey said hotly. Even while speaking, an objection stirred at the back of his mind. That couldn't be right. Speed with safety was his new car's main selling point; the interior designed to make impact injury virtually impossible. Providing one used the seat belt, and he always did. But if he had, he should not have suffered a damaging blow to the head.

Why hadn't he thought of that? Because this was his first post-accident encounter with Kiri. When it came to problem-solving, they were complementary.

She was touching his arm. "Hey, you were concussed, you can't expect to remember whether the belt was on or off, don't fret..." They looked at each other. Kiri stepped back hurriedly, scowling.

"Sounds logical," Macksey conceded to gloss over the awkward moment. Funny girl, Kiri Sellars: gauche, moody, and a hell of an engineer.

He took the swivel stool and started fiddling with the coffee-maker. Ms. Sellars, a firm feminist, declined to do domestic chores, and he was a coffee-holic. She'd allowed the filters to run out again, but a sheet of soft paper and some origami work should create a substitute.

As planned, she lost patience by his third botched fold and took over. Her hands were small, deft, and disfigured by countless nicks, minor burns, and chemical stains. One Christmas he'd given her nail varnish as a joke stocking-filler and she had hurled it at his head. Watching neat fingers fly, Macksey murmured, "Funny, until you mentioned the seat belt..."

"What?" Kiri demanded after he had fallen silent long enough for the little machine to start gulping and burping cheerily.

"Nothing," Macksey lied. "Look, can you give me a lift into Lackland, Dorsett's Garage? Sam Dorsett rang just now, said they'd got the car ready."

She shrugged ungraciously. "You want to pay technician's wages for a driver, go ahead. I just work here."

"Rider," he corrected, dividing the brew between their mugs. Kiri rode a Honda Gold Wing, a lot of bike for a woman who hardly reached his chin. Fresh air might raise his spirits—since the garage people had told him bodywork repairs would cost as much as a good used car, Macksey felt in need of morale lifters.

Ten minutes later they were on the road. She kept the Honda in low gear, giving it minimal

lean on bends. Previous pillion rides with Kiri had been tests of nerve, making him thankful that crash helmets are compulsory under British law.

Sam Dorsett had been at school with Adrian Macksey, but when he led his friend into the office overlooking the forecourt, the garage owner was subdued. "My check won't bounce," Macksey joked. Dorsett frowned and shook his head.

"If I didn't know you better," he responded bluntly, "I'd think that crash was caused by drink."

"Rubbish, I'd no more drink and drive than shut my eyes and fire a shotgun into a crowded street."

Dorsett said, "Yes, that's what I can't make out. From the damage to your car, you must have hit that bend at forty miles an hour, minimum. It's nearly a hairpin at the foot of Hangstone Hill there, only a drunk or a loony would try taking it so fast. Look, everyone knows you work too hard when you're in the mood, Adrian. Maybe you just nodded off at the wheel, fell asleep, it happens. What I'm saying, as a mate, is for God's sake drive carefully in future."

"I thought," Groff Hanson grumbled indistinctly, muffled by steak and kidney pie—they were having a pub

lunch—"you'd agreed to drop the hypochondriac stuff."

Macksey kept his temper. "This has nothing to do with worrying over being unconscious for so long. It's very simple: if I was wearing my seat belt, then why was I knocked unconscious? Putting it the other way round, if the belt *wasn't* fixed, how did I escape so lightly, concussion apart? Sam Dorsett says an engine mounting was sheared, the impact was that violent."

Groff grinned cynically. "Sam's in business, garages always boost the damage to make their bills look better."

"Not Sam. If anything he shaded the bill in my favor, he's like that." Macksey sipped his plain tomato juice—nothing to do with Sam Dorsett's warning, he rarely touched alcohol at midday.

Groff Hanson's look was close to outright dislike. "Give me patience! Your seat belt must have been on, else you wouldn't be sitting here nattering like an old woman. You don't need a bang on the head for concussion, whiplash can do the trick, a really savage to-and-fro motion... like when you smash into a tree."

Macksey was unconvinced. His partner leaned closer. "Nobody blames you for anything, Ade—you didn't hit anyone else,

you'll pay the bills. But a word to the wise, there are some funny rumors around Lackland already, the usual stuff; were you high at the time, and if so, on what? If the stories rumble on, it won't exactly help the company. The best way to kill rumors is to let them die from lack of oxygen. In other words, shut up about the accident."

Staring incredulously, Macksey exclaimed, "What's the matter with you, Groff? I'm not trying to get out of anything. I just want to make sense of it."

"Sense," Groff Hanson countered, "is exactly what you aren't making, old son."

"Dinner?" Kiri Sellars echoed suspiciously. "I don't think so, Adrian. I'll work all hours when needful, but socializing is the Sex Machine's department, thanks." Her dislike for Sara Hanson, based on a single meeting, was powerful, and as far as Adrian Macksey could make out, quite illogical.

"Don't call her that." In any one else he would have attributed the antipathy to Kiri's jealousy. But while they'd been firm friends since college, it was platonic friendship. "Sara's a—"

"Very wonderful human being," Kiri struck in. "Watch

this." She was absorbed in an apparently childish game, sending high-frequency vibration along a chromed steel rod so that a plastic banded fiber bracelet crept from left to right. "New coating plus a *very* subtle cambering of the inner surface," she crooned.

It wasn't a game, they were improving the firm's founding gadget, the Macksey Self-locating Sealer, a.k.a. "The Walking Flange," known if not exactly loved on oil rigs around the world. Macksey switched off the test rig. "I need to talk things out. Groff isn't reasonable on the subject and in any case he's a patronizing old sod, and Sara bites my head off. They both think I can't come to terms with losing five hours or so, the night of the accident. But things have moved on from there."

"Have they, indeed?" She studied him thoughtfully. "All right, dinner. But at my place, there's a pot roast needs eating before it sprouts exotic mold and takes over the world. I detest throwing good food away."

"When did you start cooking good food? Can't wait, sounds real gourmet landmark."

"Better phone the Sex Machine before she defrosts her own gourmet landmark from the supermarket," Kiri taunted back. Smiling covertly when he

retorted stiffly, "Sara and I don't have to account to each other and ask permission for everything." He'd been reaching for the receiver when she spoke . . .

Kiri Sellars had inherited her widower father's Victorian terraced cottage. Macksey was surprised and warmed at how good it felt to throw himself into a familiar armchair and relish the living room's eccentric decor—a framed technical drawing that had won her a prize at the age other little girls were essaying fairly ambitious needlework, the sepia photograph of Grandpapa Edwin Sellars helping to rig a Bristol Fighter during World War I, giant gilded letters from some demolished Edwardian storefront, hung up and arranged like pictures.

"Nothing's changed," he murmured.

"It's only a year since your last visit, what did you expect, gold flocked wallpaper and a Jacuzzi in the hall? Don't get comfortable, there's wine to open and a table to lay. And go down the garden; pick some apples, you can reach better. Can't be bothered with dessert, and fresh fruit is good for your teeth."

The pot roast was less punishing than it had sounded, but only just. At least, Adrian Macksey reflected ruefully, it

encouraged him to put his thoughts in order, if only to divert attention from his palate.

When he'd laid out doubts, puzzles, queries, Kiri said, "I had to go to Birmingham that day, chase up the magnesium housings. What went on while I was away, up to the time of the accident? . . . as far as you can remember," she added hastily when he began shaking his head.

"Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I went to work, naturally. Fiddled about with the test rig, got nowhere, walked across the yard to the works, made a nuisance of myself there until Joe Buckloss chased me out. Couldn't settle to anything, and there was racing at Oldberry Heath so I played truant, snuck off in the car and watched the horses run."

Savoring the wine—once broken of keeping reds in the fridge, there was little Kiri Sellars could do to wine—Macksey went on, "I left before the last race, and since it's a two hour drive back from Oldberry and the next-to-last race was the four forty-five P.M., I'd have got back around sevenish.

"I'm virtually certain I went and adjusted the test rig, because there's this picture of . . ." Adrian Macksey stopped talking. Chin on palm, Kiri waited, refusing to force the pace.

Laughing sheepishly he confessed, "I've just realized the flash I have is of a red cylinder reflecting in polished lino floor tiles. Not the lab rig, that's the fire extinguisher in the corridor by Groff's office. I must have been there. Trouble is, the blackout doesn't start with the crash, it goes back a bit and forward a bit, either side. The doctor reckons that is normal. Anyway, I was in the building, either upstairs or down—the next bit is coming to in hospital. Scary because naturally the ward's bigger than my bedroom and when I started taking the real world in again, the walls seemed to have vanished and I thought I must be in bed at home after some kind of explosion.

"Five hours! Five hours of driving and crashing and wandering off and being in hospital, giving poor Sara grey hairs—and as far as I'm concerned, the entire period has been sliced out and stored away in the Fifth Dimension, for me it simply doesn't exist any more."

Kiri soothed, "At half past eight that night you were still in the building. I rode past on my way back from Birmingham and your car was there. Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

She gestured confusedly. "I nearly stopped off to see what

you were up to. But it was late and I was tired and cold and besides—" Changing her mind in mid-sentence, Kiri amputated it. Obviously her mind was busy, eyes narrowing.

Intent on his own concerns, Macksey muttered, "All right, no man admits to being a lousy driver, but at least I'm safe. And I know Hangstone Hill, I'd never try blinding around it at forty, any fool knows it's not safe at much above jogging pace." He grinned ruefully. "Any fool with local knowledge, that is. What in the world got into me, Kiri? Supposing I have another brainstorm . . . maybe I ought to turn my license in, go everywhere by taxi. And another thing, what the hell was I doing on that road, anyway? It doesn't go anywhere in particular."

Kiri said, "How good is your recollection of the time before . . . well, what you call 'the slicing out'?"

"Clear enough. I parked the car; all the lights seemed to be out in the back office block and naturally the works had been deserted for hours, so I got my keys out."

"Hang on," she butted in. "Was there another car in the park?"

Macksey struggled to think back. "Give me a break, I'm in and out of there half a dozen

times a day, fifty weeks a year. See objects enough, and they're invisible."

"But when you went in and did whatever it was, the offices were empty," Kiri persisted.

"Sure, I told you."

Kiri Sellars didn't look at him, attention devoted to tipping her half-empty wine glass and altering the slant of its contents. "What worries you is having an impossible accident. Correction, sloppy phrasing, an accident that should never have occurred. Consider a radical solution: you didn't have that accident."

Wrong-footed by what he could take only as a cryptic wisecrack, Adrian Macksey attempted a chuckle.

Kiri was patient. "Ade, you're not just a careful driver, you're notably slow. Everybody laughed behind your back when the Sex Machine nagged you into buying that flashy GT car because a tortoise like you would never get it out of third gear. You could no more drive into the Hangstone hairpin at forty miles an hour than . . . well, you just *wouldn't*."

"Don't you see? That's why you got concussion even though you should have been safe with your seat belt fastened. Because you weren't in the car at the time."

"Sorry, I'm not with you."

Anger eroded Kiri's poise. "Oh, you idiot, wake up! You were bopped on the head that night or there was a fight and your head hit the wall or whatever. The person involved was scared out of their wits, no doubt. But then you came round, and because they had experience of concussion and its effects, they soon realized that you weren't really with it—out on your feet.

"You'd ask where you were, and a minute afterwards, need to be told all over again. Very common phenomenon, your brain was out of sync for the moment. They saw a way to smooth everything over, get out from under and account for your condition.

"What they did was sit you in your car and drive it to Hangstone Hill. They put you out at the side of the road, told you to start walking, and then knocked the car out of gear and gave it a shove, letting it coast down the slope and crash.

"Then they went home rejoicing—the attack on you had never happened."

Macksey whistled softly before addressing her with sarcastic awe. "You're wasting your time in the firm, you ought to be writing TV thrillers. God, and I was worried because the *accident* made no sense! Were you listening to yourself?

Somebody tries to kill me, fails, and goes to all that trouble making it look like bad driving. If they wanted me out of the way, why get me out of the car before crashing it? Hark at me, taking this stuff seriously, looking for logic. Kiri, stick to the lab."

"Smug as well as stupid," she snarled. "Ade, he didn't want to kill you, he hasn't the backbone for that. I doubt whether he even fought you. More like panic when you walked in unexpectedly, he tried to rush past and knocked you down those stairs by the fire extinguisher."

Pouncing on a word, Macksey repeated, "He? Which he, for instance?"

Kiri delayed a direct answer. Unusually, she was ill at ease with him. Macksey reached over and took the glass away, so she fiddled with the tablecloth instead. "Listen, I'm in an impossible position . . . You badgered me into working this out, Ade, I didn't come telling tales to you."

"Who do you imagine clobbered me that night?" he demanded. "Never mind the preamble, get to the wild accusations."

"Very well. When I rode past, your car was there and so was Groff Hanson's. The light was on in his office."

"Groff was there that night?"

But . . . he never mentioned it. No, he can't have been, else he'd have said."

"I'm not making this up," she snapped. "That's why I didn't stop and join you—I can't stand that slimy toad or his beloved sister. Maybe he wasn't there, I was zooming past on my bike at thirty per, just time to spot your car and his, and the light from his window. Maybe he left his car outside the firm all night and walked home—it's only six miles to Lackland." Kiri could be sarcastic, too.

Macksey squeezed his palms against his temples. "But if Groff did . . . We're friends, I josh him a bit but there's no bad blood. Say he lost his temper for some unknown reason, laid me out, why would he cover it all up afterwards? He knows I don't hold grudges, I'd never sue him or report him to the police for assault or something."

"I imagine," she said calmly, "that Groff wanted to buy himself time, once he was sure you weren't dead or in danger and could not remember what happened." Macksey's baffled look made her clasp his hand.

"Ade, let's take it for granted that I'm a jealous, possessive bitch who thinks the worst of everybody. Groff Hanson loves gambling—don't forget my cousin Eddie is a bookie, I get to hear these things—and up to a

couple of years ago when the pair of you teamed up, he was better known for betting and owing than winning or paying.

"Since then, his luck hasn't got any better but his stakes are too rich for the local bookies' blood and they're having to lay off his bets with the big boys. But Groff never keeps them waiting, it's cash on the nail and according to Eddie, two or three hundred quid at a time is commonplace. Multiply that by up to ten race meetings a week and . . ."

Eyebrows raised, Kiri waited expectantly.

"All right, I'll buy it," he said dully. "What?"

She clicked her tongue in exasperation. "You get the auditors in, dummy. A snap audit. He's cooking the books, how much plainer can I make it?"

Macksey drank wine without tasting it. "Why the hell didn't you warn me before this? The rigged accident stuff, that's outrageous, pure science-fiction, but the rest . . . You should have told me!"

Kiri seemed to shrink, her fingers peeled away from him. Her voice was almost inaudible. "I wasn't sure myself. I could have hated Groff because he's the Sex Machine's brother and foisted her off on you. I only heard about the betting last week, ran into my cousin at a

wedding and he dished the dirt. I'd have told you soon, anyway—and you'd fire me, most likely, think it was spite and . . . stuff," she finished lamely.

"Spite? What have you got to be spiteful about?" Macksey's head was spinning.

Kiri Sellars stood up. "Go home," she said wearily. "But promise me you'll have that audit run. Will you, please?"

Rumor, Macksey told himself disgustedly, and her cousin Eddie, that possibly mythical informant.

"Please," she repeated.

"Yes, all right." Anything to shut her up. There was something badly amiss with Kiri, no question. Somehow she'd taken his legitimate unease over the accident and woven it into an extraordinary fantasy. And where did spite come in? He had been overworking her, she must take a long holiday, he'd tactfully maneuver her into taking time off, give her a bonus, and insist that she spend it on an overseas vacation.

The darkness was zestfully bracing, a premature autumn nip in the air. Macksey felt better, walking down the cottage's front path. Kiri called after him, "Adrian . . . just get the auditors in, don't discuss this with anyone, promise?"

"Whatever you say."

After his initial stumbling approaches to the story, Sara switched off the TV. Her attitude did her credit, Macksey considered. "I can't pretend to like your Ms. Sellars, darling, but I wouldn't wish a nervous breakdown on anybody. Send her to Acapulco, poor love—I mean, she is your strong right arm."

Macksey hugged her. "I don't know about that. Package tour to the Costa Brava, maybe." They laughed together but next morning Adrian Macksey learned that the laugh was on him.

He was drunk when Kiri Sellars located Macksey the following night. Not incapable, slurred, falling about; merely grimly, gauntly stewed to the gills. The landlord of the Artificers Arms, an old friend of hers, addressed Kiri ventriloquially, smiling politely at her boss the while. "Near a bottle of vodka since we opened at six, luv—fer Gawd's sake pour him 'ome soon."

Macksey smiled maliciously as she slid onto the bench beside him. "Aha, rat returns to sinking ship. Lost your sense of direction? Where the hell have you been all day, when you could have been screaming 'Told you so' and really enjoying yourself!"

"I was in London," she said meekly. "You went straight home and told her, you chump."

"Yeah, sure, more told-you-so." He made a futile attempt to lift his glass, not realizing that Kiri's little paw was clamping its base to the table. "They ran off together while I was still asleep this morning, bloody Hanson and his bloody sister. Sick!" A spasm of distaste made Macksey shudder.

"How bad is it?" she whispered.

He blinked at her, anger competing against disgust, before understanding. "Oh, bloody Hanson's taken the firm for fifty thousand quid. At least. It'll be days before we know the worst. We'll survive, just. No thanks to him." His lips pursed. "No thanks to me, what a jerk I've been."

Macksey blinked again, becoming schoolboyish in an instant. "I don't feel . . . terribly . . . well."

Kiri grabbed his wrist, fitted her shoulder into the cup of an armpit, marched him out—the landlord, austere efficiently, helping on the other side and kicking the swing doors open for speed of expulsion.

"Four in the morning," said Kiri Sellars. Macksey had just levered him-

self off the pillow, whimpering. "You're in bed, so lie still. Try to enjoy the room going round."

"It isn't any more." His eyes shut.

"Yes," she agreed mercifully, "you were beastly ill. I hosed you down and put you away for the night. Slow driver, terrible drinker, we'll never make a playboy out of you, my dear."

He opened his eyes, smiled wanly. But then, evidently remembering everything that had sent him on the bender, he put an arm across his face.

She said, "There's more to it than Hanson embezzling, yes?"

"It's nasty, Kiri. Horrible. Groff and Sara, they're . . . more than brother and sister. When I woke up this morn—yesterday morning, she'd left a note. Telling me not to follow them, not to make trouble or I'd regret it. That was just bluff. Some stuff about spying on Groff at the office, but they'd outsmarted me. So you were right, it's still a blank to me, but I must have gone in that night and heard a noise or seen a light upstairs, and caught him . . . who knows? With a pile of cash that he couldn't explain, maybe."

"A guilty conscience could do it," Kiri theorized. "He *knew* he was a thief, you blundered in, he panicked and knocked you over, I'm sure of it."

Macksey sat up, voice stronger. "Let's drop the subject, I'll be doing enough talking to the police and the auditors and the tax man. I'd rather forget the disgusting pair of them and concentrate on working my tail off and saving the firm."

Defying the plea, Kiri spoke musingly. "Know why I had such a horror of Miss Hanson? The way she looked at her brother. He was very good, all hot air and bonhomie, but women rarely fool other women."

"Don't," Macksey cried. "The note was bad enough, but then I steamed round to Hanson's flat, bullied my way past the hall porter, made them let me in. He'd left everything, taken off in what he stood up in, soon as she warned him. Plenty of evidence around. Lots of Polaroid snaps in a drawer—Groff and Sara, hugging, kissing, on a beach with arms round each other."

Kiri nodded boredly. "Yes, a loving couple. That's why I went to London, to do some research at the Public Records Office. The more information the police have, the better chance of nailing them, I thought." She shocked him by giggling.

"It isn't incest," said Kiri. "Sara Hanson's name is Sara Hanson because she married a certain Gordon Roffey Hanson

in 1983. I knew he was a slimy toad. What sort of man plants his wife on the victim he's bleeding white, so as to have a spy in the enemy's camp?"

Much later, Macksey told her with an air of discovery, "I feel better about the whole thing. It's weird. I'm still angry and pig-sick over being taken to the cleaners, but at least it's just . . . well, honest crime without perversion thrown in."

"That's why I told you. For somebody brilliant in his own odd way, you're remarkably dense. Ade, the world's turned upside down in the past few days, you've lost a mistress, Groff Hanson has regained a wife, everything could be different. It's making me light-headed, I want to be dangerously frank. If I am, will you promise not to laugh or have a fit of the vapors?"

"Fire away," Macksey invited comfortingly.

Kiri Sellars' fists clenched, she spun round to turn her back on him. "That's it, that's what I can't stand! Jolly good chums, she's a-good mate . . . Look, I don't care what happens to our relationship, well, I care intensely but you know what I

mean . . . just as long as we reach an agreement. Listening? If you ever, *ever* say I'm your only platonic woman friend, I will be at liberty to knee you in a thoroughly unsporting location."

Nettled, confused, he protested; "But it's not insulting, I thought you wanted to be liked and respected, no strings, no passes."

She turned again and sat on the edge of the bed. "Take this concept aboard: I am your platonic friend because you have never given me a chance to be anything else. Watch my lips. You are in bed, my bed, my bedroom, my house. I'd much rather it was our house. I can't match the Sex Machine for marquee publicity, but I'm ten times smarter and a hundred times straighter and anyway, publicity isn't everything."

Slightly less than a month afterwards, Adrian Macksey was woken by a not unpleasant commotion and asked Mrs. Kiri Macksey what was so funny.

"Honest crime," she giggled. "The self-righteous way you said it, and I nodded away, solemn as a judge. We must both be crazy, Ade."

FICTION

Snitch

by David Braly



Illustration by Joe Jereda

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Although it was late and dark and cold, the big double doors of the truck garage stood open and a mechanic was bent over the engine of a Freightliner when three men walked in.

The three stopped just beyond the entrance to look around. A Ford truck tractor was parked near the Freightliner tractor. Beyond them, deep within the garage, was a blue Oldsmobile sedan. The mechanic was the only visible human presence.

"It don't look like Pete's here," said one of the men. A thin fellow whose eyes moved perpetually, he stood between the other two men.

"He's here, Jimmy. He said he'd be."

This from the heavy man on Jimmy's right. He had a twisted mouth and piercing eyes, and wore an expensive overcoat.

The third man, distinguishable by his thick glasses and curly tan hair, nodded at the Oldsmobile. "He must be in the office," he said.

They walked to the office in the rear of the garage. The third man knocked.

"Who's there?" came a voice from inside.

"Rick. Jimmy and Sam are with me."

"Come on in."

Rick opened the door and they walked in.

The small office was occupied by a cluttered desk, a few old steel chairs, and a doorless cabinet crammed with oil products and papers rubberbanded in stacks. A lean man with dark features and black hair was sitting behind the desk. The sleeves of his white shirt were turned up halfway to his elbows.

Pete shoved back a ledger he'd been working on, lit a cigarette, and reclined in his chair, lifting one foot onto the desk edge. He stared through the cigarette smoke at the three men.

"How was the trip?" he asked.

"Cold," said Rick. "Damned heater's busted again."

"Probably just needs to be blown out. We can fix it. . . . I heard a snowstorm's moving in."

"We ran into it," said Sam. "Good thing we had on studs or we would've ended up in a ditch."

"Slick, huh?"

"I'll say."

"Do you remember that year we slid off the road coming back from meeting Charlie King?" asked Jimmy. "Up there in the woods,

nobody else on the road, a three-mile walk through freezing wind to the nearest town. That was bad."

"Yeah, that was bad," agreed Pete.

A moan rose from below the desk. Pete reached down, moved his hand around on something, then reached up to withdraw the cigarette from his mouth. A German shepherd's head rose, rubbing against Pete's side to demand more petting.

"Old Idaho's here, huh?" asked Jimmy.

"Idaho's here," said Pete, reaching over with his other hand to pet the dog.

"I remember when he was just a pup. Do you fellows remember that?"

"I do," said Rick.

Sam didn't reply.

"Of course we were just pups ourselves then," continued Jimmy. "And Idaho used to follow us everywhere: the movies, the park, everywhere."

"He would've followed us to school if he could've," said Rick.

"Dogs are like that," said Pete. He was silent several seconds, then asked Sam: "Is anybody out there?"

"Quinn's working on a truck motor."

"Tell him to finish tomorrow."

Sam lumbered out of the office. He came back a minute later and reported that Quinn would leave as soon as he washed his hands.

Sam seated himself on one of the steel chairs.

Jimmy looked at a chair as though he intended to walk over to it, but he glanced at Pete and even though Pete wasn't looking at him Jimmy remained where he was. Rick glanced at Jimmy several times when Jimmy was looking at the chair.

"It's cold in here," said Sam.

"Some of the heat from the stove comes in," said Pete, referring to a small pot-bellied stove in the work area. "Not enough."

"You oughta buy a heater," said Jimmy.

"I plan to. I'd intended to do it this week but things got busy and I ain't had time to go to the hardware store."

"You sure would be a lot more comfortable with a heater," said Jimmy. "When you get cold, your body is less able to fight off infection. That's why colds usually come in cold weather even though colds have nothing to do with the cold."

Jimmy chuckled. Rick and Pete smiled appreciately.

Sam tapped out a cigarette, put it between his heavy lips, and lit it. He shook out the match.

There was a loud knock on the door. "I'm leaving now, boss," called Quinn.

"See you tomorrow," called Pete.

"Good mechanic," said Sam.

Pete nodded. "Just as important, a good worker. He usually stays here until I force him to go home. It ain't because there's problems at home, either. He just loves his work."

"I used to want to be a mechanic," said Jimmy.

Pete and Sam laughed. Rick shifted his feet.

"No, really," said Jimmy, chuckling now. "I know it sounds weird, considering my mechanical inabilities, but that was something I wanted to do."

"You wanted to do a lot of things," said Sam.

"That's true. And once, for about a half year or so, I wanted to be a mechanic. I wanted to be able to fix cars and trucks and things, to work in a garage, the whole bit."

"For half a year," said Sam.

"For half a year, yeah. All right, so it wasn't too long. But for that time, short as it was, I wanted it bad."

Everybody laughed now, including Jimmy and Rick.

As the laughter began to diminish, Rick said: "Hey, hey, remember the time Jimmy wanted to be a veterinarian?"

Everybody began laughing again.

"And rounded up every stupid cat in the neighborhood!" said Sam.

"And every dog that wouldn't bite him!" said Pete.

"And tried to tie them all up together!" said Sam.

"But tying them all together was your idea, Sam!" said Jimmy.

"What a fight!" said Sam. "Cats chewed up, dogs scratched up—"

"I had to keep him away from Idaho!" said Pete.

They all laughed harder, holding their sides. Pete had to sit up straight in his chair he laughed so hard.

As the laughter was dying down Jimmy glanced at the chair beside Sam, then at Pete. Jimmy walked over and sat down.

Sam continued to laugh but less hard than he'd done before Jimmy sat next to him.

Pete watched Jimmy sit down. He continued laughing just as hard.

Rick watched Jimmy sit down, glanced over at Pete, and then continued laughing the same as before.

The laughter finally died.

"Those were the days," said Rick.

They all agreed that those were the days.

"That's one idea that wouldn't've been so bad," said Jimmy. "I like animals."

"I would feel sorry for any animal you tended," said Pete. "I think Sam's touch would be more delicate."

They all laughed again.

"And what would Viv say?" asked Rick with a glance toward Pete, who was looking at the top of his desk thoughtfully. "As I recall, Jimmy, Viv isn't terribly fond of animals."

"You're right about that," said Jimmy. "She's afraid of dogs, says cats smell, says birds have bugs on them and . . . Yeah, you're right about Viv."

Pete extinguished his cigarette in a tin ashtray, then patted Idaho on his shoulder. "Idaho don't like vets," he said.

"I guess it's good that I never became one, then," said Jimmy.

Jimmy and Rick smiled.

Sam said: "Idaho always was a good judge of people."

For a minute no one said anything. Pete patted Idaho. Rick and Jimmy glanced at each other repeatedly. Sam stared at the desk while he puffed on his cigarette.

"Sure is cold tonight," said Rick at last.

"Sure is," agreed Jimmy.

"Gonna get colder, too."

"Say, you know what?" said Jimmy. They all looked at him. "We oughta go by my house for a bite. Viv's the best fixer of hot soup and hot chocolate that ever lived."

Sam chuckled.

Rick and Jimmy looked over at Sam. Rick then looked down at Jimmy, who turned pale. Pete was stroking his dog, not looking at anyone now.

"I mean . . ." began Jimmy. "We could stop by . . ."

Pete pulled out his pack of cigarettes, tapped one out, and lit it.

Sam leaned forward, crushed out his own cigarette in Pete's tin ashtray.

Sam slouched deeply against the steel chair's imitation leather back. He looked over at Jimmy and smiled.

Jimmy smiled back.

"I don't wanna miss *Falcon Crest*," said Sam. "I'm gonna miss most of *Dallas* as it is."

"Hey," said Rick.

Jimmy trembled slightly, looked over at Pete who was looking down at Idaho while he petted him.

"I like *Falcon Crest*," Sam giggled.

"Sam," said Rick.

Pete looked up at Rick. "Is there anybody out front?"

Rick glanced down at Jimmy, then turned to the door.

"Rick," said Jimmy.

Rick paused, then opened the door and walked out.

"Hey, Pete," said Jimmy. "Come on."

"Don't," said Pete.

"Hey, come on."

"I said, don't."

Everybody sat in silence waiting for Rick to return.

Rick came back a minute later.

"Well?" asked Pete.

Rick glanced at Jimmy, then looked at Pete. "It's clear."

Sam stood.

Pete patted Idaho on the head, then rose to his feet. He removed his coat from the back of his chair and put it on. He zipped it up.

Pete looked over at Jimmy. "Let's go," he said.

Jimmy looked at Rick, who quickly looked down at the floor.

"We ain't got all night," said Sam.

Pete walked around the desk. "It's time," he said.

"Can't we talk it over?" asked Jimmy.

"Let's go," said Pete.

Jimmy looked over at Rick again, but Rick was staring intensely at a grease spot on the floor.

"Let's go," repeated Pete.

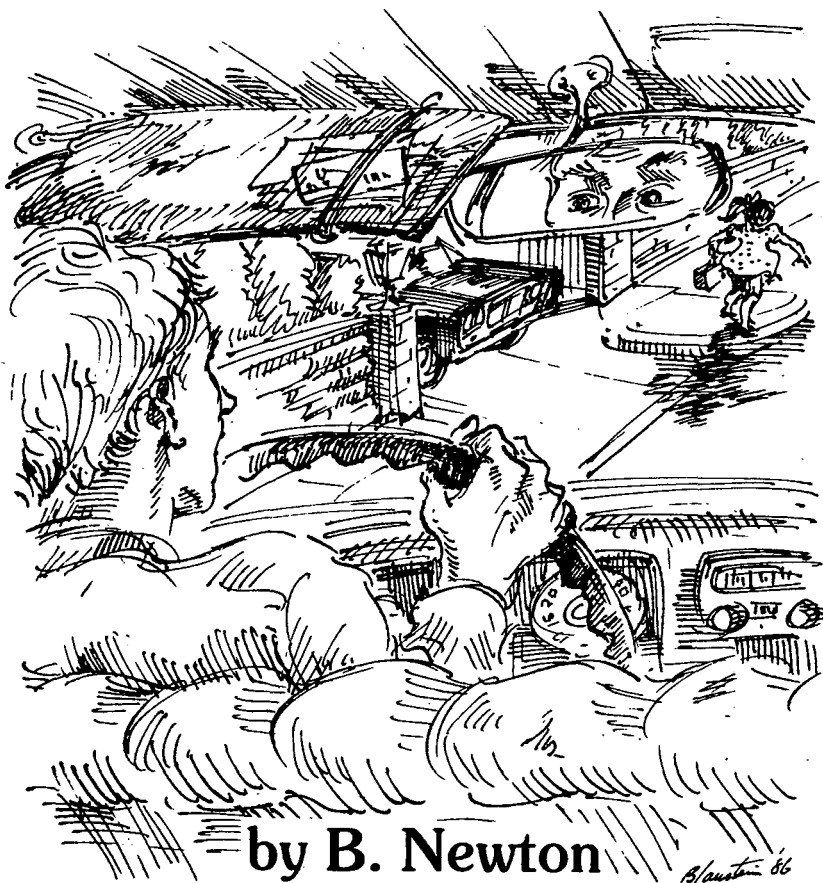
SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

P Ike
C Frank
1B Kirk

2B Hank
SS Mike
3B Nick

LF Luke
CF Rick
RF Jack

Simple Minds, Simple Tasks



by B. Newton

Blaustein '86

If I weren't mute, I could swear. If I weren't mute, I *would* swear; since I am mute, I can't. There are times, though, when I'd give my left arm to.

Take the morning I was late and hopping around the kitchen trying to pull my left sock on and also finish my coffee before it turned cold and getting nowhere with either.

The phone rang. I spilled the coffee and ripped my big toe through the sock and it would have been nice to swear. There's something sweet and satisfying in the way "dammit" forms on the tongue and slips from the lips. With me it forms all right, it just doesn't slip anywhere. Frustrating as hell.

While I wiped up the coffee, Charlotte answered the phone. Charlotte's my live-in maid. She's a student at the university here and studying telecommunications, and I think her real reason for staying with me—getting out of the dorm and saving on rent aside—is so she can do her thesis on "Communicating with a Mute." I don't tell her this. She's smart and pleasant and helpful, and I like her. So who cares why she stays?

"That was Murray," she said, coming into the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes. Murray's my younger brother. He's also my

partner in AAAM Investigations. He does all our legal and paper work because he has a law degree—and because I could really care less. I enjoy the leg-work, that's all. Murray's the manager; I'm the boxer. It works. Always has.

"He wants you to pick him up. His car is in the garage getting a paint job."

I sighed and poured what coffee was left in my cup down the sink. Working with Murray is bad enough: *going* to work with him is unbearable.

"And he told me to tell you to get your butt in gear." She smiled. "He doesn't want to be late."

Before I could throttle her, she skipped out of the kitchen, giggling.

"Al," said Murray, looking at the floor of Maggie, my green '68 Ford, "this car is filthy. How can you drive like this? My God, the Health Department would create a new committee of study—condemned vehicles—if they saw this. My God . . ."

We weren't even out of his driveway. I was looking at a very *long* fifteen minute ride to our offices in the city.

Murray picked his briefcase up from the floor between his legs and wiped it off before plac-

ing it in his lap. "When was the last time you cleaned this thing?" he asked.

I shrugged. I had no idea. I began to explain to him that Maggie was like my soul: she carried within her everything that was dearest to me; she was my best friend, my compatriot, my faithful Rozinante, and I preferred feeling comfortable in her. I thought it all sounded pretty deep, but Murray panicked, deep or no. He always does when I'm signing and driving at the same time. He doesn't believe it's safe.

I always assure him I'm capable of driving perfectly well with the sides of my knees guiding the steering wheel, but it brings him no comfort. So I do it as often as possible: he's my brother.

Before putting my hands back on the wheel, I asked if we had any job lined up for the day.

"Nada," he said. "I'll be honest with you, Al. It's getting tight. A couple of repos, insurance and credit checks, and that one stolen property recovery, and that's been it since April. Two months, Al."

Murray thinks I can't count. But it's fractions I have trouble with, not months.

"We need to get more business going. We haven't been doing enough. Not near enough. A half dozen or so jobs in two

months is not enough, Al."

I shrugged. When was anything ever enough?

"I'm glad you can shrug it off like water on a duck's back. I'm really glad."

He didn't sound glad.

"If AAAM Investigations goes belly up," he said, twisting in his seat to face me, "what are you going to do? What? Me, I can get a position in any number of law firms around here."

True enough. He was a damn good lawyer. I would've told him so, but I needed to keep my hands on the wheel because traffic was getting heavy and I didn't want to scare him.

"But you," Murray continued. "What would you do? Investigations and police work are all you've ever known. And with your condition . . . well, what then? Are you going to just shrug then, too? Are you?"

I couldn't help it. I shrugged.

Murray gave a disgusted snort and turned to look out the window. For a younger brother he worries way too much about his elder.

He didn't talk to me the rest of the ride. He got out ahead of me after I had parked Maggie and walked into the building alone. He didn't say a word in the elevator; neither did I. Of course, I never do and Murray usually does, so the quiet *was*

a little unsettling. As we entered our office I had just about decided to apologize for shrugging and for not cleaning Maggie of all my dearest junk when we both pulled up short.

It looked like we had a client.

He stood up and faced us. He had been sitting on the hard straight chair in front of the desk.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," said Murray, raising an eyebrow.

I bent and picked up the *Free Press* from where they slide it under the door, but I didn't take my eyes from our visitor.

"I hope you don't mind my being here like this," he said, and smiled. "The young lady on the first floor had keys and let me in so I wouldn't have to wait for you in the hallway. She said you were late."

I looked at my watch. Ten minutes. But that explained it. The "young lady" is Mrs. McNaughton, the superintendent's wife, and she's closer to forty than I am and trying to look as young as Charlotte and not doing so hot. She doesn't throw herself at younger men—she drops herself like an A-bomb, and if they smile, the world is theirs. Our guest had already shown he could smile. And he was young—twenty-five, twenty-six—tanned, tall enough, built nicely, and he

dressed sharper than anyone his age has the right to. He had money; the scent was as strong as his aftershave. His jaw was a little pointy but firm; his nose was less pointy and less firm; his eyes were wide and kind of off-blue. He combed his blond hair back to allow a full view of his face. He would have little difficulty exciting Mrs. McNaughton into a swoon.

He was handsome, and I didn't like him.

I walked past him to my seat beside Murray's desk and sat.

Murray was shaking his hand and assuring him it was no problem, no problem at all. He had smelled the same scent I had. "What can we do for you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Jonathan Walkawill," he said. "And you are?"

"Murray Anthony Hubbs." Murray gestured in my direction. "My associate and brother, Albert Hubbs."

"How do you do?" If Walkawill was talking to me, I didn't notice. I was opening the paper to the crossword puzzle. Clients are Murray's headache. He has to be amicable. I don't.

"Mr. Walkawill." Murray seated himself behind his desk. "What can we do for you this early morn?"

"I'll be frank, Mr. Hubbs," he said. "I think my wife is seeing another man."

Behind my crossword I wanted to giggle. But I only cleared my throat.

"Hmmm." Murray scratched an eyebrow. "These can be very delicate cases, Mr. Walkawill. I hope you're aware of that?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly." He resumed his seat in the hard chair. "But it's important that I produce . . . evidence, shall we say? Yes, I think that's a good word for it. Evidence."

"I see," said Murray. He leaned back in his chair. "From experience, Mr. Walkawill, I think I can say that 'evidence,' as you call it, might make a more lucrative divorce; however, it may also prove emotionally draining—"

Walkawill laughed. "Divorce?"

Murray sat forward and put his elbows on the desktop. "You find divorce funny, Mr. Walkawill?"

Murray would give up a job if he could believe he'd helped save a marriage. He has this idea everyone can have as happy a married life as he has, and fails to understand some guys just aren't as lucky. I know about luck, believe me. And some aren't. At all.

"Who said *anything* about divorce?" asked Walkawill. There was some laughter left over in his voice.

"Why else would you want to

collect evidence of your wife's affair?"

Murray does that all the time. Answering a question with a question. The Socratic method, he calls it. Psychotic is more like it, and it bugs the hell out of me. That's why he does it: I'm his brother.

"Why?" said Walkawill. "Leverage. Leverage. Pure and simple."

I had almost finished the puzzle by the time he had summed up his past three weeks. I needed a five letter word for one of the seven wise men of Greece, starting with an "s" and ending in an "n." I had no idea. I didn't know there were *any* wise men in Greece. Except maybe Socrates. But then he drank hemlock, so what's so wise about that?

As Walkawill told it, his wife had all the money — and *lots* of all of it. He had married her three years ago for it, and his intentions were no secret.

"As long as I kept her pleased," he had smiled, "everything was fine." He even got along well with her young daughter from her first short-term marriage.

But he must have lost the touch because three weeks ago everything went from being fine to a little shaky. She dismissed the entire household staff, giv-

ing them a month to locate new employment, pack up, and hit the road. Including the butler who had been there for twenty years, had worked for her father, and become an institution of sorts.

She wanted to start fresh he said she said.

That hadn't bothered Walkawill at the time. The household servants weren't his business and he wasn't a servant, he was her husband, so what had he to worry about?

I would have told him he had oodles to worry about, but I was wracking my brain for a Greek wise man and couldn't be bothered with explaining to him through Murray the details of his status as "husband."

A week after his wife's purging urge, Walkawill started to worry that he might become another victim of her "fresh start" program.

She took to living in the east wing of the house; they hadn't slept together in over a month. She started leaving the house at all hours of the day and night and not wanting to tell Walkawill where she was going or what she was doing.

That bothered Walkawill.

Then the clincher came. That same week, around eight thirty one morning, when he had awakened several hours earlier than usual, he noticed from his

bedroom window a black sedan pulling out of the mile-long circular driveway. It did not belong to any of the servants, and he did not remember any vehicles driving up to the house during the night. Three days later he again observed the sedan leaving his driveway early in the morning.

"I've decided," Walkawill ended, "that Trish is having an affair right under my nose. I could confront her with it, but I don't think I want to lay my cards on the table until I've more an idea of what she's holding. I wouldn't mind at all if I didn't think she'd kick me out to move someone else in. She seems terribly restless and, I'll be frank, I'm a little nervous. You see," he smiled endearingly, shyly—though I knew better—"I *like* where I am. I like having money, and I like being able to do what I want. I would prefer it to stay that way. I'm sure you see where I'm coming from."

I saw. I just wished he'd crawl back under it. I don't like these kinds of cases. They're dirty, and make me feel the same.

"So what do you want us to do?" asked Murray.

"Just do what you normally do." He spread his hands. "Whatever's necessary. I want evidence. Pictures, recordings, I'm sure you know about all

that. Anything I can use as leverage for my position. I'm very security conscious." He smiled.

Murray sighed. He hates these things as much as I do, maybe more. They disgust me; they sadden Murray. I'm not sure which is worse. "We'll take care of it," he said, but I knew he wouldn't have taken it on if we hadn't needed it. It pains him that dirty money will pay the rent just as well as good.

The two of them discussed the finances and the workings, and Walkawill ended up throwing ten hundreds on the desk as a retainer. Murray wanted to give him a receipt, but Walkawill said he'd just as soon not have one to be found.

"We've got to trust each other," he said with another smile, though this one was harder.

I thought that was stupid. I was glad when he left. I gave Murray the crossword to show him how much I'd completed without a dictionary.

He looked it over, grunted, and tossed it back to me. "Solon," he said.

I decided I'd never show him another, then filled it in when he wasn't looking.

Two hours later I had Maggie parked far down the street from the address Walkawill had

given Murray. The blacktopped driveway broke out onto the road from a large, full fence of evergreen shrubs that did what they were landscaped to do and shielded the majority of the pillared white mansion behind them. The driveway had two entrances, and I placed Maggie on a deserted stretch of the street where it began to curve before dead-ending into an undeveloped field. I had a clear view of both entrances but had angled Maggie so I couldn't be noticed easily and so a security patrol wouldn't come upon me—unless they were looking for me.

I could keep my eyes out for Trish Walkawill's burgundy sports car and follow her wherever she might lead. Walkawill wanted a detailed report of her comings and goings, and Murray had promised him one and I was to get it for him. Wonderful.

I stretched out in Maggie and waited.

Nothing happened that day. I followed Trish Walkawill to and through an expensive clothes store where my blue windbreaker couldn't have made dust cloth status, and to her tennis class at the country club, where they wouldn't let me in, and then to a late lunch with her tennis instructor, an attractive brunette I would like

to have seen play a game.

Trish herself was near forty and trim and shapely and I never got close enough to determine if the red hair was natural—though I wouldn't have minded. Getting close enough, that is.

After lunch, she went home and didn't come out again. I broke off about midnight to get something to eat and was back at my post an hour or so later. Murray and Walkawill had decided it would be good to observe the time of the sedan's arrival, the length of its stay, and its departure time. They wanted a report on that, too, so I had to wait there till six thirty. I had listened to my Sinatra tape four times all the way through, the whole time just aching to sing along with him. When the sedan appeared, though, I instinctively killed Frank and slouched behind the wheel.

The car came slowly down the road and turned off its lights as it eased quietly up the drive. It was too dark for detail. I could only be certain the driver was a man and that, whoever he was, he didn't want to announce his arrival.

I waited five minutes or so before leaving Maggie and making my way up the unlighted driveway. It was chilly that early in the morning and

I was glad for my windbreaker. I walked along the side of the driveway in the grass because I felt more hidden in the shadows of the well-cut lawn. Dew soaked my shoes as I followed the pavement up to a large parking circle beside the east wing of the house. In the morning light the house loomed up eerily white and large and quiet. There were only two cars parked in the circle: Trish's sports car and Walkawill's cream colored Lincoln.

I was a little baffled until I realized the drive continued around to the back of the house. The sedan was parked there in front of the five door garage, and it was alone. On the ground floor a window was still curtained and lighted; a shadow passed behind the curtains. It was terribly quiet back there, and watching the lighted window, I began to feel the dirt of the case. I took down the license number of the sedan and headed back along the driveway to Maggie. I felt better once I'd reached her. She was a mess, but she was clean.

I woke at eight twenty-five as a little girl of about six in a frilly red dress that billowed around her knees came down the driveway. She wore white knee stockings and white buckled shoes and car-

ried a yellow Peanuts lunchbox. Her long red hair was tied into a ponytail with a white ribbon.

She walked off down the road, swinging the lunchbox and looking as if she were trying to whistle. Then she took the corner and was gone. I settled back to wait for my sedan. Three minutes by Maggie's adhesive digital I waited before it came racing down to the road. It squealed a turn and went the way the girl had. I was puzzled. What was the guy's hurry? I started up Mag and followed just to see what was up. Charlotte says my curiosity will be the death of me. I've always looked at it the other way around.

I turned Maggie into the sun and down the empty block I could see the girl still swinging her lunchbox. Her side of the street was lined with shrubs; the other was bordered by the great sandstone wall of the neighboring ranch.

The sedan was the only car on the street as far as I could see. I squinted because of the morning sun and dropped Maggie's visor: it was ripped and stained and a pretty sore sight, I thought. Murray would have a fit. I'd see if I couldn't maybe brighten it up one day when I had nothing better to do.

The sedan speeded up,

slammed in close to the curb a few feet in front of the red-haired little girl. The door whipped open, and a youngish guy with black hair jumped out, took two steps, and grabbed the kid, who only got out the weak side of a scream before he slapped his hand over her mouth and plunged with her into the car.

Something was wrong. Big time. I banged the accelerator to the floor, and Maggie lurched and flooded and stalled.

The sedan's door slammed, and it burned pavement screaming away. And it was the little redhead I heard.

I restarted Maggie twice, begging her, please, Mag, come on, girl, come on. She wouldn't do it.

Dammit, Maggie. I slapped my palms on her steering wheel.

She roared. She doesn't like to make me mad. Uncomfortable and foolish looking, yes. Angry, no.

I sped down the road after the sedan and saw its tail as it disappeared around a corner.

I thought for a moment of Walkawill and his wife and the case, then didn't give it a second one. If Murray could try to save marriages . . .

The sedan took four or five more turns before settling onto a gravel back road and following it for fifteen or so miles into

wilderness. I lost ground all the way. I've never gotten a speeding ticket in Maggie. It's against her makeup to speed. She goes only as fast as she feels is necessary—this time what she considered necessary just wasn't fast enough.

The road curved swoopingly and when I came out of it, the sedan was gone. I almost panicked, but instead raced Maggie again and pounded the seat with my fist and wanted to bang my head against the wheel. I cursed Maggie for not being faster and myself for letting the sedan escape me.

As I was thinking how I could clobber my head without driving Maggie into the bushes and scratching and denting her already scratched and dented frame, I passed and almost missed a gravel truck trail leading off into the hills and trees on the left side of the road. I backed Maggie up and parked her beside what must have been a quarry road, the only place the sedan could have disappeared to so suddenly. I left Maggie to recuperate from the speeds and my curses and headed down the quarry road on foot. I didn't forget to take my .38 out of its shoulder holster.

After about fifty feet of hard working trees, the road cut in and around and there were only

tall weeds and thick thorny bushes and insects that were slowly waking and becoming loud. The sun was drying up the morning's dew but still had a ways to go, and sky was blue with only a few clouds keeping it from being clear. My shoes scuffed and kicked the gravel of the road no matter how softly I attempted to walk.

Three hundred yards in, the road opened up and the bushes fell away and before me was a deep abandoned quarry with a spreading green lake over its floor and deeply etched, craggy cliffs closing it off from the world. The road gently continued down to the shore of the lake where it became as sandy as a beach. Everywhere there were huge hills, almost mountains, of excavated sand, and there were no trees, only tiny scraggly bushes off by themselves. Because there were no trees the sun, like the hills of sand, was everywhere.

Far down and to the left off the road, the sedan was parked next to a decrepit trailer, its red paint chipping. The trailer was the old control center of the quarry. The foreman worked from there. When the crew cleared out after there was nothing left to mine, they apparently abandoned the trailer as a kind of flag: we were here, the trailer said.

I could not see the kid or the man who had snatched her. They were in the trailer, I was sure. Except for the insects the quarry was silent, and except for the sedan it was empty.

I started down the road, kicking and sliding along the gravel, .38 at attention.

As I neared the trailer I circled around to its blind side away from the car. I could hear the girl crying and a harsh voice trying to quiet her coming from inside.

I ran hunched over the rest of the distance and pressed my back against the trailer's wall. The crying was louder. I could make out words.

"Shut up. I didn't hurt ya. You're all right, dammit. Now, shut up."

I was going to shut him up. I slipped around the corner to the door. It was open a little. I leveled the .38 and eased the door open wider with my foot.

I stopped hearing all insects. The wind seemed to cease blowing.

I could see that the guy had his back to me and was holding a long butcher knife and that the kid was sitting on a chair in the corner. She was crying, and I didn't think she could see me through her tears.

"Will you shut up!" he yelled. "Just shut up," and he waved the blade in her face.

I pushed the door a little more, afraid it might squeak or groan, then stepped in. The guy didn't turn. I watched the hand with the knife.

I wanted to step up behind him and say, "Freeze, punk, before I scatter your brains like chicken feed." But I didn't—I couldn't. Instead, I took one swift step and swatted him over the head with the butt of my gun. He dropped with an "Unngh" into a useless form on the floor. It was less dramatic, but it was safer, and, too, I'm not one to waste time with words. I snatched the knife from where it had fallen and rolled him over.

I was pretty sure it was Walkawill's lover boy.

After frisking him and coming up with sixty-three cents, I checked his pulse and unfortunately he still had one. But he'd be out long enough to grow a nice full beard if the swelling fist on the back of his head had anything to say about it. I hoped he had a slight concussion and asked God to give him a nice one before I left him spread out on his back, his mouth hanging open, to take a look at the kid.

She didn't come running into my arms like I had expected. She scooted back farther on the wooden box she had been dumped on and watched me with eyes that were never dry

of tears. Her cheeks were stained, her mouth bruised and purple where he had slapped her, her lovely clean red hair falling over her forehead in terrible confusion and no longer lovely or clean. Her red frilly dress was torn where she had caught it on a thornbush; her stockings were dirtied with sand, her shoes all scuffed, one buckle broken.

If I hadn't been afraid she was seriously hurt, I might have smiled.

I stepped towards her, and she cringed and pulled back, her frightened eyes darting to my hands. She bit her lip and whimpered softly. I realized I still had my .38 and the guy's butcher knife.

I stepped outside and waved for her to follow. It took some doing and she never came close, but finally I coaxed her off the box and into the sunlight. Then while she watched I hurled both the .38 and the knife as far as I could out into the green lake twenty yards away. We watched them plop, kersplash, and then the ripples start their journey towards shore.

I smiled at her, pulled my jacket pockets inside out, held my hands away from my body, raised my eyebrows. Then I pointed to my mouth and shook my head and frowned. I pulled an imaginary zipper across it

and twisted a button and folded my lips in. I was glad we were in the bottom of an empty quarry. I wouldn't have wanted Murray or anyone else watching me play Marcel Marceau.

I don't think she understood. She stood still and sniffled and I was afraid she would run. If I lost her in the quarry, I might never find her among all the hills of sand. I watched her so she wouldn't get the jump on me.

God! I just wanted to say one thing. I prayed for a miracle so I could tell her I wasn't going to hurt her, but God vetoed that request. I must have used up my quota with the concussion bit.

I didn't know how to make her trust me. I smiled—a lot. I've never smiled so much. All that smiling and she never smiled back.

I looked at my feet to think. Murray says sometimes that's where my brains are, and maybe he's right because I came up with an idea. A small one. I knelt to the ground, picked up a twig from under a bush, and spelled my name in the sand. "Al," it read. Then I pointed at it and tapped my chest. If I could talk, I would want to say something like, "Me, Al," and it's probably just as well that I can't.

I stood up and stepped back

so she could come close and read what I'd scrawled. She did, and I would have thanked God for it, but *He* had used up His quota. She studied it and looked up at me. I smiled big and patted my chest and nodded. She read in the sand again.

She whispered, "Al?"

I could barely hear her over the wind and the lapping of the lake, but I heard her because I wanted to. I nodded vigorously, gave the thumbs up sign, the okay sign, then both thumbs up. I had no idea which she would understand. She must have understood one of them, though, because she said, "Al," again, but still refused to smile or to come take my hand.

I pointed to my name, pointed to my chest, pointed to her, and cocked my head.

She was quick. "Louise," she said.

I grinned and, picking up the twig after she had backed away, wrote "+ Louise" next to "Al." When she read it, she almost smiled.

I figured, or hoped, or prayed, that she'd follow me back up the quarry road to Maggie and let me take her home again. If not, I didn't know what I'd do. I sure as hell didn't want to kidnap her again. She'd been scared out of her mind already—I didn't want to contribute to any of it.

In the trailer I hauled the

sonofabitch over my shoulder and started up the quarry road with him. I waved for Louise to follow.

She thought about it, I could tell. Then she came along. All the way back to Maggie I looked every second or so to make sure she was keeping up. I smiled each time and waved my fingers "hi." She never waved in return.

At Maggie I dumped my burden in her dusty trunk on top of the spare. It didn't look comfortable, but I didn't really care. Ten minutes later I had Louise in Maggie's passenger seat and was heading home. I gave her sly smiles the whole time, kind of an advanced game of peekaboo.

It was important to me that she smile.

She still hadn't when I stopped by the office to pick up Murray—my Aaron. Murray's good with kids. He knew how to handle her and talk to her.

I explained everything as fast as sign language would allow—and that's faster than Murray can keep up. He had me slow down twice. Louise stared at my hands through the entire story. She forgot about the cocoa Murray had given her. I liked showing her what I could do. Afterwards I thought that was silly.

On the way back to the Walkawill mansion, I drove while Murray sat in the back seat with Louise, talking with her softly. She was upset because she had lost her lunchbox. Murray promised we'd get it again for her.

I figured it had to be alongside the road where she had been grabbed. I hadn't seen it in the quarry or trailer. Maybe it was in the sedan, but I'd search for it through the shrubs along the road anyway. If I found it, that would be nice, I thought.

The butler let us in and almost went into a faint when he saw Louise. He couldn't believe it.

"What . . . how . . . what happened?" he asked, staring at the little girl between us.

"May we see Mr. or Mrs. Walkawill, please," said Murray. It was good to have someone to do the talking.

"Cer . . . certainly. My God." He disappeared down the hall.

We sat down with Louise in the living room off the foyer and waited for her parents. It was warm, so I took off my jacket and draped it across the arm of the chair. Louise looked tired and dirty and relieved to be home. I could imagine.

The butler wasn't long in reappearing, and he ushered us

down a wide carpeted hall to a study at the back of the house. He told us he had not mentioned to the Walkawills the state of their daughter. He hadn't wanted to cause undue alarm.

I told Murray to tell the jerk this wasn't undue anything, but Murray didn't. Instead he reminded me I had forgotten my jacket in the living room.

I thanked him.

When we entered the study, Trish Walkawill ran across the room, a small cry escaping from her. She grabbed Louise from between us and hugged the little girl to her. Walkawill stood and I heard him gasp once. I didn't think that was enough.

"What happened?" asked Trish Walkawill. "My God, what happened?" She ran her hands over Louise's face and dress and legs and back to her face as if checking to make sure she was all there.

While Murray related my adventures, Trish clutched Louise close. I liked that. Walkawill stood by the fireplace, staring, and smoking a thin cigar. That, I didn't.

When Murray was done, Trish Walkawill turned to me. "How can I ever thank you?" she asked, and her tears were the same as Louise's.

I shrugged.

"Al would say he did what he

had to, just as any man would have," said Murray, looking at me and smiling and winking.

That's not exactly what I would have said but it sounded nice, so I shrugged again and looked at the carpet.

"Thank God you were just driving by," she said, kissing Louise's forehead.

"Yes," said Murray, glancing at Walkawill, "thank God."

It was just as well I'm mute.

"And the man is in the trunk of your car, right? He can't get out, can he?"

"No. The police will be here soon to take care of him."

She insisted on paying us our normal fees plus any bonus she felt necessary, and Murray was unable to persuade her otherwise.

I don't think he tried very hard. He knew we needed it, and it was evident she could afford it. I didn't mind. But we were going to have a serious talk about Walkawill's job.

The police came, Lieutenant Quise with them. Murray told the story one more time before we all trooped out to Maggie. I had to run back inside for my jacket and the keys, but I didn't mind making Quise wait—I like to push his patience.

When I returned, he wanted to know how long the joker had been in Maggie's trunk.

Not long enough, I signed.

"About an hour," Murray translated for Quise. "He'll be fine. There are enough rusted holes in that trunk for plenty of air, and I'm sure the bump Al gave him is far from his just deserts. I wouldn't worry about him."

I gave Murray the "bingo" sign.

Quise frowned. He's always concerned with the criminal's rights, and we don't get along because I forget they have any.

I pulled my keys from my jacket pocket and opened the trunk to show the cops Mr. Comatose.

Only he wasn't comatose any longer. He was dead. He'd been shot twice in the head. Maggie's trunk was now not only dusty but bloody as hell as well.

The cops looked at me. Quise looked at me. Murray looked at me. And all I could do was shrug and look back.

Quise wanted to see my gun.

Murray explained I'd thrown it into the quarry lake.

He didn't like that.

And right out there behind Maggie the real questions began. You knocked him over the head, eh, Al? That's all, you're sure? No righteous indignation, right? What kind of gun you got, Al? Tell us the story again, Al. From the beginning.

I didn't even have the right to call my lawyer. Murray was

standing right there next to me, and was as confused as I was. They'd ask a question, I'd tell Murray, Murray would answer for me.

The entire time I was trying to think of what the hell had happened. Who could have killed him locked in my trunk? He couldn't have even shot himself, for crying out loud. At least not twice. Besides, he didn't have a gun, and that's hard to do without a gun, locked in a dark, cramped trunk. Shoot yourself, that is.

Twice.

They had put the cuffs on me and were handing me into one of the prowl cars and Murray was assuring me everything was all right, even though he knew I knew everything was *not* all right, when Louise came running out of the huge double doors and across the driveway yelling, "Al, Al, Al, Al." I saw the butler appear in the doorway behind her and call to her weakly.

"Look, Al." She was waving her yellow Peanuts lunchbox.

It took me a minute, but not Murray. Already he was insisting that Lieutenant Quise release me, that new evidence had arisen, and so help him God if they kept me cuffed one second longer, he'd not only have Quise's badge but the gold filling in his tooth.

Murray's quite dramatic. He's good in a courtroom. He'd be better than usual, I imagine, if he were defending me: I'm his brother. Quise uncuffed me. I wasn't sure what did it: the badge threat or the filling one, but I didn't much care.

I took Louise's lunchbox and studied it. I pointed to Snoopy atop his doghouse and then to Murray, and that did it. She smiled. It was worth waiting for, I thought.

Then I settled down to business. I flew into outlining to Murray what must have happened. Quise was lost and dumbfounded outside this foreign language, and I liked that.

When I was done, Murray nodded.

"Right you are," he said. "But why?"

Leverage, I told him. Pure and simple.

The next morning Murray was explaining for the fifth or sixth time all that had happened, though he never seemed to lose his taste for it.

I was doing the morning's crossword puzzle—in pen, which I considered daring. Murray wouldn't have, so I didn't tell him.

"So you see, Mr. Walkawill, when he was informed that he was being dismissed after

twenty years of loyal service, he felt he had to do something to . . . secure his position, as *you* might say. He came up with the kidnapping as a good way to assure his comfortable retirement and planned it all with his brother." Murray's tone went to a soft scolding. "His brother's black sedan was the car you thought was your wife's lover's. He only came twice—the two times you saw him. He went into the back of the house around six in the morning, before anyone was awake, to make plans with Carlson, and then he left around eight thirty to follow Louise's route to school. They planned for Jeremy to snatch Louise on that section of road because it was virtually deserted. That would have worked except for two things. One, the biggest, my brother Al here wasn't planned on."

I could feel Murray looking at me and I knew that if I glanced over the paper at him, he'd wink or some such fool thing, so I didn't. I concentrated on my puzzle.

"The second mistake," continued Murray, "was Carlson's walking out to the scene to pick up after his brother and remove any evidence that might have been dropped. He found and brought home the lunchbox because he was afraid someone else might find it and give away

the kidnapping before they intended. He thought he could explain its presence by saying Louise had forgotten it. And that would have been fine, too, except Louise *knew* she hadn't forgotten it and so did Al. When it turned up, it was damning."

"I see," said Walkawill. "I thought for a minute there you suspected me."

I didn't say a word.

Murray did. "Well, you weren't far from our minds, to be honest. We knew you were looking for leverage, that Louise was not your child, and . . . well, a number of things. But there was no way you could have killed Jeremy in Al's trunk."

"I still don't understand how Carlson worked that."

Simple minds, simple tasks, I thought.

"Simple," said Murray. "When he heard from the hall that Jeremy was unconscious in Al's trunk, he panicked. He knew that Jeremy was the only link to his involvement in the affair. He was certain Jeremy wouldn't keep him out of it and take the rap alone. So he went through Al's jacket pockets and removed the keys, took a gun he kept in a foyer closet, hustled out, shot his unconscious brother twice, muffling the reports with oil rags he found in the trunk, returned the keys, and that was that. It probably took all of

three or four minutes. He was hoping the cops would hang Al with the murder. Which was not a desperate hope, to say the least. But with the lunchbox and then finding the gun in a cupboard in the kitchen, which they'll run a ballistics test on, you won't be seeing butler Carlson for a very long time."

"What about my wife these past three weeks? What's been up with her?"

I wanted to sniff in sarcasm. I didn't. I'm too polite.

"I've got an idea," said Murray.

"I'm listening."

"I hope so." Murray leaned forward, intent. "Why don't you ask her?"

Murray the marriage counselor, I thought.

"I see," said Walkawill.

"Good," said Murray.

There was a small quiet for a while.

Then Walkawill said, "About the retainer for our original deal..."

"Yes?" said Murray, leaning back and folding his hands.

I lowered the paper just enough to see Walkawill.

"Well," he fidgeted a little, "considering that my wife will be sending you a check for quite

a sizable sum and that really there was nothing to the investigation, I thought... well..."

"Yes?"

I lowered the paper all the way to my lap.

"Well, I thought I could have my retainer returned. Not all of it, of course," he hurried on, "only say, half?"

Murray raised an eyebrow, looked at me.

I smiled sweetly.

He turned back to Walkawill. "Do you have a receipt, Mr. Walkawill?"

Murray can be okay.

Two days later, Trish Walkawill's check came in the mail along with a card. I gave the check to Murray to handle: it would relieve his mind of some of his worries. I kept the little thank you card crayoned by Louise on pink construction paper. I liked the stick man drawing of me and the stiff way I was holding a little stick girl's hand. I knew it was me because it had "Al" and an arrow; I knew the green stick girl was her because it was crayoned "+ Louise." She drew me not green but purple: two eyes, one nose, two ears, no mouth.

I stuck it on the sun visor of Maggie. I liked the colors.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Gentleman from America

by Michael Arlen

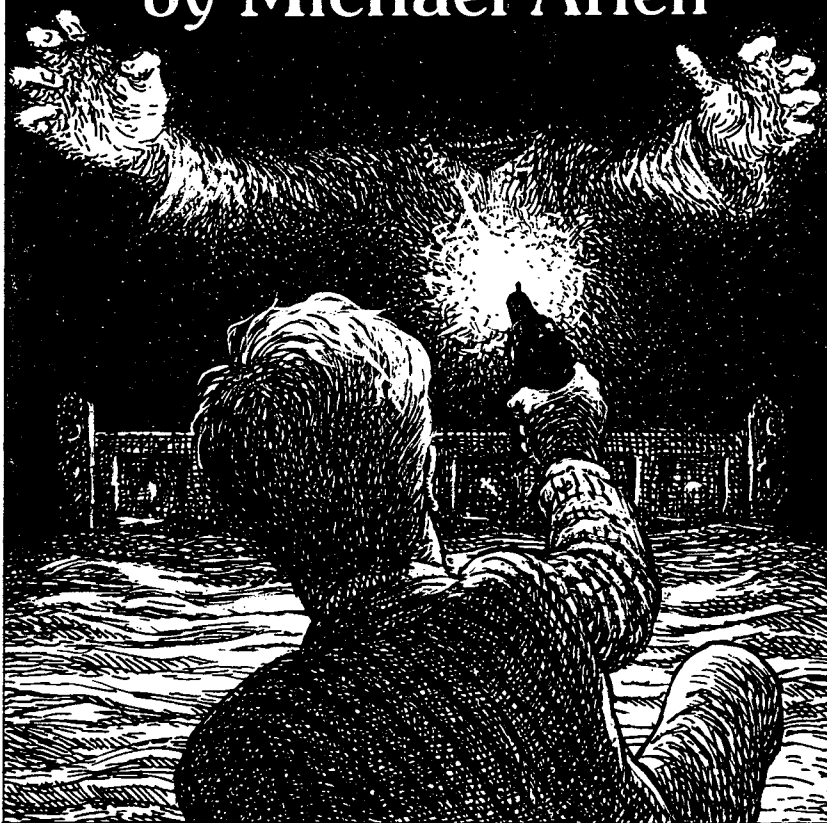


Illustration by Joseph Smith

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It is told by a decayed gentleman at the sign of The Leather Butler, which is in Shepherd's Market, which is in Mayfair, how one night three men behaved in a most peculiar way; and one of them was left for dead.

Towards twelve o'clock on a night in the month of November some years ago, three men were ascending the noble stairway of a mansion in Grosvenor Square. The mansion, although appointed in every detail—to suit, however, a severe taste—had yet a sour atmosphere, as of a house long untenanted but by caretakers.

The first of the men, for they ascended in single file, held aloft a kitchen candlestick, whilst his companions made the best progress they could among the deep shadows that the faulty light cast on the oaken stairway. He who went last, the youngest of the three, said gaily:

"Mean old bird, my aunt! Cutting off the electric light just because she is away."

"Fur goodness' sake!" said the other.

The leader, whose face the candlelight revealed as thin almost to asceticism, a face white and tired, finely molded but soiled in texture by the dissipations of a man of the world, contented himself with a curt request to his young friend not to speak so loud.

It was, however, the gentleman in between the two whom it will advantage the reader to consider. This was an unusually tall and strongly built man. Yet it was not his giant stature, but rather the assurance of his bearing, which was remarkable. His very clothes sat on his huge frame with an air of firmness, of finality, that, as even a glance at his two companions would show, is deprecated by English tailors, whose inflexible formula it is that the elegance of the casual is the only possible elegance for gentlemen of the mode. While his face had that weathered, yet untired and eager, look which is the enviable possession of many Americans, and is commonly considered to denote, for reasons not very clearly defined, the quality known as Poise. Not, however, that this untired and eager look is, as some have supposed, the outward sign of a lack of interest in dissipation, but rather of an enthusiastic and naïve curiosity as to the varieties of the same. The gentleman from America looked, in fine, to be a proper man; and one who, in his early thirties, had established a philosophy of which his comfort and his assurance of retaining it were the two poles, his easy perception of humbug the pivot, and his fearlessness the latitude and longitude.

It was on the second landing that the leader, whose name was

Quillier, and on whom the dignity of an ancient baronetcy seemed to have an almost intolerably tiring effect, flung open a door. He did not pass into the room, but held the candlestick towards the gentleman from America. And his manner was so impersonal as to be almost rude, which is a fault of breeding when it is bored.

"The terms of the bet," said Quillier, "are that this candle must suffice you for the night. That is understood?"

"Sure, why not?" smiled the gentleman from America. "It's a bum bet, and it looks to me like a bum candle. But do I care? No, sir!"

"Further," continued the impersonal, pleasant voice, "that you are allowed no matches, and therefore cannot relight the candle when it has gone out. That if you can pass the night in that room, Kerr-Anderson and I pay you five hundred pounds. And vice versa."

"That's all right, Quillier. We've got all that." The gentleman from America took the candle from Quillier's hand and looked into the room, but with no more than faint interest. In that faulty light little could be seen but the oak paneling, the heavy hangings about the great bed, and a steel engraving of a Meissonier duellist lunging at them from a wall nearby.

"Seldom," said he, "have I seen a room look less haunted—"

"Ah," vaguely said Sir Cyril Quillier.

"But," said the gentleman from America, "since you and Kerr-Anderson insist on presenting me with five hundred pounds for passing the night in it, do I complain? No, sir!"

"Got your revolver?" queried young Kerr-Anderson, a chubby youth whose profession was dining out.

"That is so," said the gentleman from America.

Quillier said: "Well, Puce, I don't mind telling you that I had just as soon this silly business was over. I have been betting all my life, but I have always had a preference for those bets which did not turn on a man's life or death—"

"Say, listen, Quillier, you can't frighten me with that junk!" snapped Mr. Puce.

"My aunt," said young Kerr-Anderson, "will be very annoyed if anything happens and she gets to hear of it. She hates a corpse in her house more than anyone I know. You're sure you are going on with it, Puce?"

"Boy, if Abraham Lincoln was to come up this moment and tell me Queen Anne was dead, I'd be as sure he was speaking the truth as that I'm going to spend this night in this old haunted room of your aunt's. Yes, sir! And now I'll give you good night, boys. Warn

your mothers to be ready to give you five hundred pounds to hand on to Howard Cornelius Puce."

"I like Americans," said Quillier vaguely. "They are so enthusiastic. Good night, Puce, and God bless you. I hope you have better luck than the last man who spent a night in that room. He was strangled. Good night, my friend."

"Aw, have a heart!" growled Mr. Puce. "You get a guy so low with your talk that I feel I could put on a tall hat and crawl under a snake."

II

The gentleman from America, alone in the haunted room, lost none of his composure. Indeed, if anything disturbed him at all, it was that, irritated by Quillier's manner at a dinner party a few nights before, and knowing Quillier to be a bankrupt wastrel, he had allowed himself to be dared into this silly adventure and had thus deprived himself for one night of the amenities of his suite at Claridge's Hotel. Five hundred pounds more or less did not matter very much to Mr. Puce: although, to be sure, it was some consolation to know that five hundred pounds more or less must matter quite a deal to *Sir* Cyril Quillier, for all his swank. Mr. Puce, like a good American, following the Gospel according to Mr. Sinclair Lewis, always stressed the titles of any of his acquaintance.

Now, he contented himself with a very cursory examination of the dim, large room; he rapped, in an amateurish way, on the oak panels here and there for any sign of any "secret passage junk," but succeeded only in soiling his knuckles, and it was only when, fully clothed, he had thrown himself on the great bed that it occurred to him that five hundred pounds sterling was quite a pretty sum to have staked about a damnfool haunted room.

The conclusion that naturally leapt to one's mind, thought Mr. Puce, was that the room must have something the matter with it, else would a hawk like Quillier have bet money on its qualities of terror? Mr. Puce had, indeed, suggested, when first the bet was put forward, that five hundred pounds was perhaps an unnecessary sum to stake on so idiotic a fancy; but Quillier had said in a very tired way that he never bet less than five hundred on anything, but that if Mr. Puce preferred to bet with poppycock and chicken food, he, Quillier, would be pleased to introduce him to some very jolly children of his acquaintance.

Such thoughts persuaded Mr. Puce to rise and examine more

carefully the walls and appointments of the room. But as the furniture was limited to the barest necessities, and as the oak paneled walls appeared in the faint light to be much the same as any other walls, the gentleman from America swore vaguely and again reclined on the bed. It was a very comfortable bed.

He had made up his mind, however, that he would not sleep. He would watch out, thought Mr. Puce, for any sign of this ghost, and he would listen with the ears of a coyote, thought Mr. Puce, for any hint of those rapping noises, rude winds, musty odors, clanking of chains, and the like, with which, so Mr. Puce had always understood, the family ghosts of Britishers invariably heralded their foul appearance.

Mr. Puce, you can see, did not believe in ghosts. He could not but think, however, that some low trick might be played on him, since on the honor of *Sir Cyril Quillier*, peer though he was—for Mr. Puce, like a good American, could never get the cold dope on all this fancy title stuff—he had not the smallest reliance. But as to the supernatural, Mr. Puce's attitude was always a wholesome scepticism—and a rather aggressive scepticism at that, as Quillier had remarked with amusement when he had spoken of the ghost in, as he had put it, the house of Kerr-Anderson's aunt. Quillier had said:

"There are two sorts of men on whom ghosts have an effect: those who are silly enough to believe in them, and those who are silly enough not to believe in them."

Mr. Puce had been annoyed at that. He detested clever backchat. "I'll tell the world," Mr. Puce had said, "that a plain American has to go to a drug store after a conversation with you."

Mr. Puce, lying on the great bed, whose hangings depressed him, examined his automatic and found it good. He had every intention of standing no nonsense, and an automatic nine-shooter is, as Mr. Puce remembered having read somewhere, an Argument. Indeed, Mr. Puce was full of those dour witticisms about the effect of a "gun" on everyday life which go to make the less pretentious "movies" so entertaining; although, to be sure, he did not know more than a very little about guns. Travelers have remarked, however, that the exciting traditions behind a hundred percent American nationality have given birth in even the most gentle citizens of that great republic to a feeling of familiarity with "guns," as such homely phrases as "slick with the steel mitt," "doggone son of a gun," and the like, go to prove.

Mr. Puce placed the sleek little automatic on a small table by

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the bed, on which stood the candle and, as he realized for the first time, a book. One glance at the paper jacket of the book was enough to convince the gentleman from America that its presence there must be due to one of Quillier's tired ideas. It showed a woman of striking, if conventional, beauty, fighting for her life with a shape which might or might not be the wraith of a bloodhound but was certainly something quite outside a lovely woman's daily experience. Mr. Puce laughed. The book was called *Tales of Terror for Tiny Tots*, by Ivor Pelham Marlay.

The gentleman from America was a healthy man, and needed his sleep; and it was therefore with relief that he turned to Mr. Marlay's absurd-looking book as a means of keeping himself awake. The tale at which the book came open was called "The Phantom Footsteps," and Mr. Puce prepared himself to be entertained, for he was not of those who read for instruction. He read:

THE PHANTOM FOOTSTEPS

The tale of The Phantom Footsteps is still whispered with awe and loathing among the people of that decayed but genteel district of London known to those who live in it as Belgravia and to others as Pimlico.

Julia and Geraldine Biggot-Baggot were twin sisters who lived with their father, a widower, in a town in Lancashire called Wigan, or it may have been called Bolton. The tale finds Julia and Geraldine in their nineteenth year, and it also finds them in a very bad temper, for they were yearning for a more spacious life than can be found in Wigan, or it might be, Bolton. This yearning their neighbors found all the more inexplicable since the parents of the girls were of Lancashire stock, their mother having been a Biggot from Wigan and their father a Baggot from Bolton.

The reader can imagine with what excess of gaiety Julia and Geraldine heard one day from their father that he had inherited a considerable property from a distant relation; and the reader can go on imagining the exaltation of the girls when they heard that the property included a mansion in Belgravia, since that for which they had always yearned most was to enjoy, from a central situation, the glittering life of the metropolis.

The father preceded them from Wigan, or was it Bolton? He was a man of tidy disposition, and wished to see that everything in the Belgravia house was ready against his daughters' arrival. When Julia and Geraldine did arrive, however, they were admitted by

a genial old person of repellent aspect and disagreeable odor, who informed them that she was doing a bit of charring about the house but would be gone by the evening. Their father, she added, had gone into the country to engage servants, but would be back the next day; and he had instructed her to tell Julia and Geraldine not to be nervous of sleeping alone in a strange house, that there was nothing to be afraid of, and that he would, anyhow, be with them first thing in the morning.

Now Julia and Geraldine, though twins, were of vastly different temperaments; for whereas Julia was a girl of gay and indomitable spirit who knew not fear, Geraldine suffered from agonies of timidity and knew nothing else. When, for instance, night fell and found them alone in the house, Julia could scarcely contain her delight at the adventure; while it was with difficulty that Geraldine could support the tremors that shook her girlish frame.

Imagine, then, how differently they were affected when, as they lay in bed in their room towards the top of the house, they distinctly heard from far below a noise, as of someone moving. Julia sat up in bed, intent, unafraid, curious. Geraldine swooned.

"It's only a cat," Julia whispered. "I'm going down to see."

"Don't!" sighed Geraldine. "For pity's sake don't leave me, Julia!"

"Oh, don't be so childish!" snapped Julia. "Whenever there's the chance of the least bit of fun you get shivers down your spine. But as you are so frightened I will lock the door from the outside and take the key with me, so that no one can get in when I am not looking. Oh, I hope it's a burglar! I'll give him the fright of his life, see if I don't."

And the indomitable girl went, feeling her way to the door in darkness, for to have switched on the light would have been to warn the intruder, if there was one, that the house was inhabited; whereas it was the plucky girl's conceit to turn the tables on the burglar, if there was one, by suddenly appearing to him as an avenging phantom; for having done not a little district-visiting in Wigan, or, possibly, Bolton, no one knew better than Julia of the depths of base superstition among the vulgar.

A little calmed by her sister's nonchalance, Geraldine lay still as a mouse in the darkness, with her pretty head beneath the bedclothes. From without came not a sound, and the very stillness of the house had impelled Geraldine to a new access of terror had she not concentrated on the works of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, which tell of the grit of the English people.

Then, as though to test the grit of the English people in the most

abominable way, came a dull noise from below. Geraldine restrained a scream, lay breathless in the darkness. The dull noise, however, was not repeated, and presently Geraldine grew a little calmer, thinking that maybe her sister had dropped a slipper or something of the sort. But the reader can imagine into what terror the poor girl had been plunged had she been a student of the detective novels of the day, for then she must instantly have recognized the dull noise as a dull thud, and what can a dull thud mean but one thing?

It was as she was praying a prayer to Our Lady that her ears grew aware of footsteps ascending the stairs. Her first feeling was one of infinite relief. Of course Julia had been right, and there had been nothing downstairs but a cat or, perhaps, a dog. And now Julia was returning, and in a second they would have a good laugh together. Indeed, it was all Geraldine could do to restrain herself from jumping out of bed to meet her sister, when she was assailed by a terrible doubt; and on the instant her mind grew so charged with fear that she could no longer hold back her sobs. Suppose it was not Julia ascending! Suppose . . . "Oh, God!" sobbed Geraldine.

Transfixed with terror, yet hopeful of the best, the poor girl could not even command herself to re-insert her head beneath the sheets. And always the ascending steps came nearer. As they approached the door, she thought she would die of uncertainty. But as the key was fitted into the lock she drew a deep breath of relief—to be at once shaken by the most acute agony of doubt, so that she would have given anything in the world to be back again in Wigan, or, even better, Bolton.

"Julia!" she sobbed. "Julia!"

For the door had opened, the footsteps were in the room, and Geraldine thought she recognized her sister's maidenly tread. But why did Julia not speak, why this intolerable silence? Geraldine, peer as hard as she might, could make out nothing in the darkness. The footsteps seemed to fumble in their direction, but came always nearer to the bed, in which poor Geraldine lay more dead than alive. Oh, why did Julia not speak, just to reassure her?

"Julia!" sobbed Geraldine. "Julia!"

The footsteps seemed to fumble about the floor with an indecision maddening to Geraldine's distraught nerves. But at last they came beside the bed—and there they stood! In the awful silence Geraldine could hear her heart beating like a hammer on a bell.

"Oh!" the poor girl screamed. "What is it, Julia? Why don't you speak?"

But never a sound nor a word gave back the livid silence, never a sigh nor a breath, though Julia must be standing within a yard of the bed.

"Oh, she is only trying to frighten me, the beast!" poor Geraldine thought; and, unable for another second to bear the cruel silence, she timidly stretched out a hand to touch her sister—when, to her infinite relief, her fingers touched the white rabbit fur with which Julia's dressing gown was delicately trimmed.

"You beast, Julia!" she sobbed and laughed. Never a word, however, came from the still shape. Geraldine, impatient of the continuation of a joke which seemed to her in the worst of taste, raised her hand from the fur, that she might touch her sister's face; but her fingers had risen no farther than Julia's throat when they touched something wet and warm, and with a scream of indescribable terror Geraldine fainted away.

When Mr. Biggot-Baggot admitted himself to the house early the next morning, his eyes were assailed by a dreadful sight. At the foot of the stairs was a pool of blood, from which, in a loathsome trail, drops of blood wound up the stairway.

Mr. Biggot-Baggot, fearful lest something out of the way had happened to his beloved daughters, rushed frantically up the stairs. The trail of blood led to his daughters' room; and there, in the doorway, the poor gentleman stood apalled, so foul was the sight that met his eyes. His beloved Geraldine lay on the bed, her hair snow-white, her lips raving with the shrill fancies of a maniac. While on the floor beside the bed lay stretched, in a pool of blood, his beloved Julia, her head half severed from her trunk.

The tragic story unfolded only when the police arrived. It then became clear that Julia, her head half severed from her body, and therefore a corpse, had yet, with indomitable purpose, come upstairs to warn her timid sister against the homicidal lunatic who, just escaped from an asylum near by, had penetrated into the house. However, the police consoled the distracted father not a little by pointing out that the escape of the homicidal lunatic from the asylum had done some good, insomuch as there would now be room in an asylum near her home for Geraldine.

III

When the gentleman from America had read the last line of "The Phantom Footsteps" he closed the book with a slam, and, in his bitter impatience with the impossible work, was making to hurl

it across the room, when, unfortunately, his circling arm overturned the candle. The candle, of course, went out.

"Aw hell!" said Mr. Puce bitterly, and he thought: "Another good mark to *Sir Cyril Quillier*! Won't I Sir him one some day! For only a lousy guy with a face like a drummer's overdraft would have bought a damnfool book like that."

The tale of "The Phantom Footsteps" had annoyed him very much; but what annoyed him even more was the candle's extinction, for the gentleman from America knew himself too well to bet a nickel on his chances of remaining awake in a dark room.

He did, however, manage to keep awake for some time merely by concentrating on wicked words: on Quillier's face, and how its tired, mocking expression would change for the better were his, Puce's, foot to be firmly pressed down on its surface, and on Julia and Geraldine. For the luckless twins, by the almost criminal idiocy with which they were presented, kept walking about Mr. Puce's mind; and as he began to nod to the demands of a healthy and tired body he could not resist wondering if their home town had been Wigan or Bolton and if Julia's head had been severed from ear to ear or only half way. . . .

When he awoke, it was the stillness of the room that impressed his sharply awakened senses. The room was very still.

"Who's there!" snapped Mr. Puce. Then, really awake, laughed at himself. "Say, what would plucky little Julia have done?" he thought, chuckling. "Why, got up and looked!"

But the gentleman from America discovered in himself a reluctance to move from the bed. He was very comfortable on the bed. Besides, he had no light and could see nothing if he did move. Besides, he had heard nothing at all, not the faintest noise. He had merely awoken rather more sharply than usual. . . .

Suddenly, he sat up on the bed, his back against the oak head. Something had moved in the room. He was certain something had moved. Somewhere by the foot of the bed.

"Aw, drop that!" laughed Mr. Puce.

His eyes peering into the darkness, Mr. Puce stretched his right hand to the table on which stood the automatic. The gesture reminded him of Geraldine's when she had touched the white rabbit fur. Aw, Geraldine nothing! These idiotic twins kept chasing about a man's mind. The gentleman from America grasped the automatic firmly in his hand. His hand felt as though it had been born grasping an automatic.

"I want to tell you," said Mr. Puce into the darkness, "that some-

one is now going to have something coming to him, her, or it."

It was quite delicious, the feeling that he was not frightened. He had always known he was a helluva fellow. But he had never been quite certain. Now he was certain. He was the regular.

But, if anything had moved, it moved no more. Maybe, though, nothing had moved at all, ever. Maybe it was only his half-awakened senses that had played him a trick. He was rather sorry if that was so. He was just beginning to enjoy the evening.

The room was very still. The gentleman from America could only hear himself breathing.

Something moved again, distinctly.

"What the hell!" snapped Mr. Puce.

He leveled the automatic towards the foot of the bed.

"I will now," said Mr. Puce grimly, "shoot."

The room was very still. The gentleman from America wished, forcibly, that he had a light. It was no good leaving the bed without a light. He'd only fall over the infernal thing, whatever it was. What would plucky little Julia have done? Aw, Julia nothing! He strained his ears to catch another movement, but he could only hear himself breathing—in short, sharp, gasps! The gentleman from America pulled himself together.

"Say, listen!" he snapped into the darkness. "I am going to count ten. I am then going to shoot. In the meanwhile you can make up your mind whether or not you are going to stay right here to watch the explosion. One. Two. Three. Four. . . ."

Then Mr. Puce interrupted himself. He had to. It was so funny. He laughed. He heard himself laugh, and again it was quite delicious, the feeling that he was not frightened. And wouldn't they laugh, the boys at the Booster Club back home, when he sprung this yarn on them! He could hear them. Oh, boy! Say, listen trying to scare him, Howard Cornelius Puce, with a ghost like that! Aw, it was like shooting craps with a guy that couldn't count. Poor old Quillier! Never bet less than five hundred on anything, didn't he, the poor boob! Well, there wasn't a ghost made, with or without a head on him, that could put the wind up Howard Puce. No, sir!

For, as his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and helped by the mockery of light that the clouded, moonless night just managed to thrust through the distant window, the gentleman from America had been able to make out a form at the foot of the bed. He could only see its upper half, and that appeared to end above the throat. The phantom had no head. Whereas, Julia's head had been only half severed from—aw, what the hell!

"A family like the Kerr-Andersons," began Mr. Puce, chuckling—but suddenly found, to his astonishment, that he was shouting at the top of his voice; anyhow, it sounded so. However, he began again, much lower, but still chuckling:

"Say, listen, Mr. Ghost, a family like the Kerr-Andersons might have afforded a head and a suit of clothes for their family ghost. Sir, you are one big bum phantom!" Again unaccountably, Mr. Puce found himself shouting at the top of his voice. "I am going on counting," he added grimly.

And, his automatic leveled at the thing's heart, the gentleman from America went on counting. His voice was steady.

"Five . . . six. . . ."

He sat crouched at the head of the bed, his eyes never off the thing's breast. Phantom nothing! He didn't believe in that no-head bunk. What the hell! He thought of getting a little nearer the foot of the bed and catching the thing a whack on that invisible head of his, but decided to stay where he was.

"Seven . . . eight. . . ."

He hadn't seen the hands before. Gee, some hands! and arms! Holy Moses, he'd got long arms to him, he had. . . .

"Nine!" said the gentleman from America.

Christopher and Columbus, but this would make some tale back home! Yes, sir! Not a bad idea of Quillier's that, though! Those arms. Long as old glory . . . long as the bed! Not bad for *Sir* Cyril Quillier, that idea. . . .

"Ten, you swine!" yelled the gentleman from America, and fired.

Someone laughed. Mr. Puce quite distinctly heard himself laughing, and that made him laugh again. Fur goodness' sake what a shot! Missed from that distance!

His eyes, as he made to take aim again, were bothered by the drops of sweat from his forehead. "Aw, what the hell!" said Mr. Puce, and fired again.

The silence after the second shot was like a black cloud on the darkness. Mr. Puce thought out the wickedest word he knew, and said it. Well, he wasn't going to miss again. No, sir! His hand was steady as iron, too. Iron was his second name. And again the gentleman from America found it quite delicious, the feeling that he was not frightened. Attaboy! The drops of sweat from his forehead bothered him, though. Aw, what the hell, that was only excitement.

He raised his arm for the third shot. Jupiter and Jane, but he'd learn that ghost to stop ghosting! He was certainly sorry for that ghost. He wished, though, that he could concentrate more on the

actual body of the headless thing. There it was, darn it, at the foot of the bed, staring at him—well, it would have been staring at him if it had a head. Aw, of course it had a head! It was only Quillier with his lousy face in a black wrap. Sir Cyril Quillier'd get one piece of lead in him this time, though. His own fault, the bastard.

"Say, listen, Quillier," said the gentleman from America. "I want to tell you that unless you quit, you are a corpse. Now I mean it, sure as my name is Howard Cornelius Puce. I have been shooting to miss so far. Yes, sir. But I am now *annoyed*."

If only though he could concentrate more on the body of the thing. His eyes kept wandering to the hands and arms. Gee, but they sure were long; those arms! As long as the bed, no less. Just long enough for the hands to get at him from the foot of the bed. And that's what they were at, what's more! Coming nearer. What the hell! They were moving, those doggone arms, nearer and nearer. . . .

Mr. Puce fired again.

That was no miss. He knew that was no miss. Right through the heart, that little boy must have gone. In that darkness he couldn't see more than just the shape of the thing. But it was still now. The arms were still. They weren't moving any more. The gentleman from America chuckled. That one had shown him it's a wise little ghost that stops ghosting. Yes, sir! It would fall in a moment, dead as Argentine mutton.

Mr. Puce then swore. Those arms were moving again. The hands weren't a yard from him now. What the hell! They were for his throat, Goddammit.

"The swine!" sobbed the gentleman from America, and fired again. But he wouldn't wait this time. No, sir! He'd let that ghost have a ton of lead. Mr. Puce fired again. Those hands weren't half a yard from his throat now. No good shooting at the hands though. Thing was to get the thing through the heart. Mr. Puce fired the sixth bullet. Right into the thing's chest. The sweat bothered his eyes. "Aw, hell!" said Mr. Puce. He wished the bed was a bit longer. He couldn't get back any more. Those arms. . . . Holy Moses, long as hell, weren't they! Mr. Puce fired the seventh, eighth . . . ninth. Right into the thing. The revolver fell from Mr. Puce's shaking fingers. Mr. Puce heard himself screaming.

IV

Towards noon on a summer's day several years later two men

were sitting before an inn some miles from the ancient town of Lincoln. Drawn up in the shade of a towering ash was a large grey touring car, covered with dust. On the worn table stood two tankards of ale. The travelers rested in silence and content, smoking.

The road by which the inn stood was really no more than a lane, and the peace of the motorists was not disturbed by the traffic of a main road. Indeed, the only human being visible was a distant speck on the dust, coming towards them. He seemed, however, to be making a good pace, for he soon drew near.

"If," said the elder of the two men, in a low, tired voice, "if we take the shortcut through Carmion Wood, we will be at Malmanör for lunch."

"Then you'll go shortcutting alone," said the other firmly. "I've heard enough tales about Carmion Wood to last me a lifetime without my adding one more to them. And as for spooks, one is enough for this child in one lifetime, thanks very much."

The two men, for lack of any other distraction, watched the pedestrian draw near. He turned out to be a giant of a man; and had, apparently, no intention of resting at the inn. The very air of the tall pedestrian was a challenge to the lazy content of the sunlit noon. He was walking at a great pace, his felt hat swinging from his hand. A giant he was; his hair greying, his massive face set with assurance.

"By all that's holy!" gasped the elder of the two observers. A little lean gentleman that was, with a lined face which had been handsome in a striking way but for the haggard marks of the dissipations of a man of the world. He had only one arm, and that added a curiously flippant air of deviltry to his little, lean, sardonic person.

"Puce!" yelled the other, a young man with a chubby, good-humored face. "Puce, you silly old ass! Come here at once!"

The giant swung round at the good-natured cry, stared at the two smiling men. Then the massive face broke into the old, genial smile by which his friends had always known and loved the gentleman from America, and he came towards them with hand outstretched.

"Well, boys!" laughed Mr. Puce. "This is one big surprise. But it's good to see you again, I'll say that."

"The years have rolled on, Puce, the years have rolled on," sighed Quillier in his tired way, but warmly enough he shook the gentleman from America with his one hand.

"They certainly have!" said Mr. Puce, mopping his brow and

smiling down on the two. "And by the look of that arm, Quillier, I'll say you're no stranger to war."

"Sit down, old Puce, and have a drink," laughed Kerr-Anderson. Always gay, was Kerr-Anderson.

But the gentleman from America seemed, as he stood there, uncertain. He glanced down the way he had come. Quillier, watching him, saw that he was fagged out. Eleven years had made a great difference to Mr. Puce. He looked old, worn, a wreck of the hearty giant who was once Howard Cornelius Puce.

"Come, sit down, Puce," he said kindly, and quite briskly, for him. "Do you realize, man, that it's eleven years since that idiotic night? What are you doing? Taking a walking tour?"

Mr. Puce sat down on the stained bench beside them. His massive presence, his massive smile, seemed to fill the whole air about the two men.

"Walking tour? That is so, more or less," smiled Mr. Puce; and, with a flash of his old humor: "I want to tell you boys that I am the daughter of the King of Egypt, but I am dressed as a man because I am traveling *incognita*. Eleven years is it, since we met? A whale of a time, eleven years!"

"Why, there's been quite a war since then," chuckled Kerr-Anderson. "But still that night seems like last night. I *am* glad to see you again, old Puce! But, by Heaven, we owe you one for giving us the scare of our lives! Don't we, Quillier?"

"That's right, Puce," smiled Quillier. "We owe you one all right. But I am heartily glad it was only a shock you had, and that you were quite yourself after all. And so here we are gathered together again by blind chance, eleven years older, eleven years wiser. Have a drink, Puce?"

The gentleman from America was looking from one to the other of the two. The smile on the massive face seemed one of utter bewilderment. Quillier was shocked at the ravages of a mere eleven years on the man's face.

"I gave you two a scare!" echoed Mr. Puce. "Aw, put it to music, boys! What the hell! How the blazes did I give you two a scare?"

Kerr-Anderson was quite delighted to explain. The scare of eleven years ago was part of the fun of today. Many a time he had told the tale to while away the boredom of Flanders and Mesopotamia, and had often wanted to let old Puce in on it to enjoy the joke on Quillier and himself, but had never had the chance to get hold of him.

They had thought, that night, that Puce was dead. Quillier, na-

ked from the waist up, had rushed down to Kerr-Anderson, waiting in the dark porch, and told him that Puce had kicked the bucket. Quillier had sworn like nothing on earth as he dashed on his clothes. Awkward, Puce's corpse, for Quillier and Kerr-Anderson. Quillier, thank Heaven, had had the sense not to leave the empty revolver on the bed. They shoved back all the ghost properties into a bag. And as, of course, the house wasn't Kerr-Anderson's aunt's house at all, but Johnny Paramour's, who was away, they couldn't so easily be traced. Still, awkward for them, very. They cleared the country that night, Quillier swearing all the way about the weak hearts of giants. And it wasn't until the Orient Express had pitched them out at Vienna that they saw in the *Continental Daily Mail* that an American of the name of Puce had been found by the caretaker in the bedroom of a house in Grosvenor Square, suffering from shock and nervous breakdown. Poor old Puce! Good old Puce! But he'd had the laugh on them all right. . . .

And heartily enough the gentleman from America appeared to enjoy the joke on Quillier and Kerr-Anderson.

"That's good!" he laughed. "That's very good!"

"Of course," said Quillier in his tired, deprecating way, "we took the stake, this boy and I. For if you hadn't collapsed you would certainly have run out of that room like a Mussulman from a ham sandwich."

"That's all right," laughed Mr. Puce. "But what I want to know, Quillier, is how you got me so scared?"

Kerr-Anderson says now that Puce was looking at Quillier quite amiably. Full in the face, and very close to him, but quite amiably. Quillier smiled, in his deprecating way.

"Oh, an old trick, Puce! A black rag over the head, a couple of yards of stuffed cloth for arms—"

"Aw, steady!" said Mr. Puce. But quite amiably. "Say, listen, I shot at you. Nine times. How about that?"

"Dear, oh dear!" laughed Kerr-Anderson. But that was the last time he laughed that day.

"My dear, Puce," said Quillier gently, slightly waving his one arm. "That is the oldest trick of all. I was in a panic all the time that you would think of it and chuck the gun at my head. Those bullets in your automatic were blanks."

Kerr-Anderson isn't at all sure what exactly happened then. All he remembers is that Puce's huge face had suddenly gone crimson, which made his hair stand out shockingly white; and that Puce had Quillier's fragile throat between his hands; and that Puce was

roaring and spitting into Quillier's blackening face.

"Say, listen you, Quillier! You'd scare me like that, would you! You'd scare me with a chicken's trick like that, would you! And you'd strangle me, eh? You swine, you *Sir Cyril Quillier*, you, right here's where the strangling comes in, and it's me that's going to do it—"

Kerr-Anderson hit out and yelled. Quillier was helpless with his one arm, the giant's grip on his throat. The woman who kept the inn had hysterics. Puce roared blasphemies. Quillier was doubled back over the small table, Puce on top of him, tightening his death-hold. Kerr-Anderson hit, kicked, bit, yelled.

Suddenly there were shouts from all around.

"For God's sake, quick!" sobbed Kerr-Anderson. "He's almost killed him."

"Aw, what the hell!" roared Puce.

The men in dark uniforms had all they could do to drag him away from that little, lean, blackened, unconscious thing. Then they manacled Puce. Puce looked sheepish, and grinned at Kerr-Anderson.

Two of the six men in dark uniforms helped to revive Quillier.

"Drinks," gasped Kerr-Anderson to the woman who kept the inn.

"Say, give me one," begged the gentleman from America. Huge, helpless, manacled, he stood sheepishly among his uniformed captors. Kerr-Anderson stared at them. Quillier was reviving.

"Gets like that," said the head warder indifferently. "Gave us the slip this morning. Certain death for someone. Homicidal maniac, that's 'im! And he's the devil to hold. Been like that eleven years. Got a shock, I fancy. Keeps on talking about a sister of his called Julia who was murdered, and how he'll be revenged for it. . . ."

Kerr-Anderson had turned away. Quillier suddenly sobbed; "God have mercy on us!" The gentleman from America suddenly roared with laughter.

"Can't be helped," said the head warder. "Sorry you were put to trouble, sir. Good day, gentlemen. Glad it was no worse."

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Sheila Smith

Adam Hall's twelfth espionage thriller is aptly named after its protagonist, the British operative **Quiller**. Quiller fans already know they can count on their hero for daring, initiative, resourcefulness, and a large dose of humanity (considering his line of work!), and this latest tale won't disappoint. The premise is chilling but credible: a U.S. submarine has been destroyed by Soviet missiles, and public outrage threatens to destroy all hopes for an impending peace conference. Quiller's mission—to locate a fearful, runaway “mole” in Russia who is carrying taped evidence of what actually occurred—thus carries with it a responsibility toward world peacemaking. Adventure runs high throughout the story, which earns good marks for its surprising plot twists, strong characterizations, and sustained suspense. *Quiller* will make a fine introduction to readers new to the novels. (Jove, \$3.95, 356 pp.)

Richard Lancelyn Green has pulled together a collection of delightful short stories and titled them **The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes** (Penguin Books, \$4.95, 272 pp.). The lengthy introduction by Green provides Sherlockian scholars with the publication histories of these “adventures,” penned by Julian Symons, Adrian Conan Doyle, and others. But even unscholarly Holmes buffs will want to add this little collection to their shelves because the stories go a long way toward taking the reader back to 221B

for more sleuthing. Obviously written by fans and admirers of the Conan Doyle originals, the tales are, in some cases, so true to the originals that one can forget their source and simply enjoy the novelty of reading a Sherlock Holmes story without knowing in advance how it all turns out.

While we're on the subject of new-found works by "old masters," I would like to recommend heartily the latest Nero Wolfe mystery. Robert Goldsborough, a long time fan of Rex Stout's admirable private detective, has written **Murder in E Minor** (Bantam, \$13.95, 196 pp.), which resurrects Nero, Archie Goodwin, Fritz, and even surly old Inspector Cramer. These names, naturally, mean little to those readers who haven't already discovered the joys of reading Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels (if any such mystery fans exist . . . ?). For the rest of you, I can guarantee that you'll be immediately wrapped up in the story, from the moment the beautiful young foreigner consults Nero Wolfe regarding notes threatening her famous conductor-uncle—to the final scene in Wolfe's East Side brownstone, with all the suspects gathered in his office. Archie's narration is as breezy and witty as we all remember it to be; Nero Wolfe is as demanding—and exasperatingly right—as he always was. In fact, *Murder in E Minor* will surely gladden many a heart, for Nero Wolfe has never been in better form than he is in this case of a murdered maestro. I don't doubt that legions of Nero Wolfe fans are desperately hoping that Robert Goldsborough keeps up the good work.

The passage of time has apparently never dimmed the world's curiosity, fascination even, with the events surrounding the Tudor king, Richard III. Shakespeare's brilliant characterization of Richard as the embodiment of intelligent evil has undoubtedly helped to keep interest alive, especially regarding the issue (which Shakespeare dramatized as fact) of whether Richard ordered the murders of his two young nephews in the Tower. This little historical observation is merely an introduction to **The Murders of Richard III**, a novel by Elizabeth Peters that has just been reissued in a striking paperback by the Mysterious Press (\$3.95, 230 pp.). It is a very British, country-manoir kind of mystery, with a motley group of houseguests madly mixed in with a murderer. The role of protagonist is shared by an American woman and a British professorial colleague, whose offbeat romance seems to thrive in the dangerous atmosphere. The Richard III element is the key to the puzzle, for the group has come together to hold its annual meeting and to introduce a piece of newly-discovered evidence that will give

its members world standing. The group, you understand, is composed of pro-Ricardians, British folks who admire Richard III and live to exonerate him of his alleged crimes. The dialogue is chock full of historical theories and tidbits regarding their favorite son, so if you too are interested in what really happened to the two princes, you should pick up *The Murders of Richard III*. (Actually, you'll probably enjoy this even if you *aren't* one of Richard's supporters.)

Just as an interest in Tudor history might enhance your enjoyment of the above novel, a love of music might make **The Beethoven Conspiracy** by Thomas Hauser more fun than it would be for one who's tone deaf. The murders of several talented young New York musicians lead Detective Richard Marritt to his interview with violist Julia Darr—and to his first clue. Together they slowly unravel a tale of madness and musical obsession, a monstrous conspiracy designed to give one greedy man a moment of incomparable satisfaction—and then deprive the world of what he has enjoyed (not to mention depriving an appallingly large number of musicians of their lives). Hauser writes smoothly, adding a dash of romance to his tale, and his pacing makes up for a plot that might, to some readers, seem implausible. (Tor, \$3.50, 284 pp.)

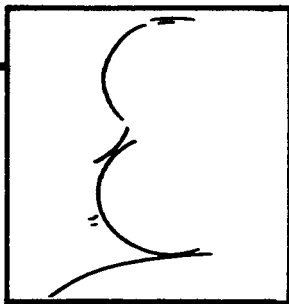
Boston private eye John Francis Cuddy debuted in *Blunt Darts*, so **The Staked Goat** (Harper & Row, \$14.95, 232 pp.) comes as a welcome second appearance to the critics who praised Jeremiah Healy's first novel. A warning to readers, though: *The Staked Goat* opens with the mutilated corpse of an old friend of Cuddy's from his days in Vietnam, and the case gets no cleaner or prettier from there on. Cuddy, who had been out of touch with his friend, meets the wife and child, who are now left in severe financial straits. He refuses to accept the police's conclusion that it was a homosexual ritual murder and instead sets out to find out by whom—and why—his buddy was murdered. In so doing he finds himself in a very scary position, one that endangers him and a woman he's beginning to care for. The subplot is just as grim, and the outcome—which amounts to vengeance, although Cuddy would call it justice—isn't for the weak of heart, either. I can admire Healy's strong and skillful writing; at the same time this is not everybody's idea of entertainment.



James Coburn, playing Major Patrick Dannenberg, in *Death of a Soldier*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Death of a Soldier, which is subtitled "A True Story," demonstrates that real world crime and detection, told in an unadorned manner, is usually far less compelling than the fictional kind. Private Edward J. Leonski, aged twenty-four, served in the American army stationed in Melbourne, Australia, during the Second World War and there strangled to death three young women. In the movie two teams of detectives set out to find the unknown killer. The local police detectives have little doubt that their man will turn out to be an American soldier. The U.S. Army investigators, led by James Coburn, hope it isn't one of theirs: the army's relations with local civilians are a delicate issue, and a scandal could hurt the war effort. As the

string of killings lengthens, however, it becomes clear that the killer is insane, extremely strong, and probably an attractive soldier capable of luring young women to out of the way spots.

The Australian detectives are two colorful, streetwise old guys, but they never solve the case. They resent the American army for blocking their investigation, at first because it supposedly wants to protect its men, then by attempting to beat the local police to the punch by finding a scapegoat who can be executed to quiet the public uproar. As the army brass is depicted, its behavior seems to confirm the detectives' view. But in the end the accusations turn out to be a case of the filmmaker misleading the audience. For the army neither selected a scapegoat (how could

they with a serial murderer at large, sure to strike again?) nor blocked the investigation. Instead, as the movie eventually shows, the army cooperated.

A lineup of muscular soldiers who were off base on the nights of the killings was put together. The Australian detectives were allowed to bring two young women who were near-victims of the killer to scrutinize this group, which included Leonski. Through no one's fault, the women failed to recognize him. In fiction, the detectives' rivalry and the pressure of time as the local population grows increasingly restive would have made for an intriguing man-hunt. In reality, though, the investigations ended when the soldier's tent mate realized that he was sharing quarters with a pathological killer and turned him in. Taking a documentary approach, *Death of a Soldier* dissipates the mystery soon after the first killing. We are shown Private Leonski getting drunk, lapsing into periodic insanity, and squeezing his victims by the throat in order to "get their voices."

The movie then turns into a courtroom drama in which James Coburn is assigned to defend Leonski and becomes convinced that justice is not being done. Why? Since Leonski is clearly insane he should be hospitalized, but the army

doctors have ruled that he understood the nature of his actions and so is liable to be hanged. Coburn cannot save him. It seems that after the war the officer on whom Coburn's character is based campaigned for and won a change in military law to protect the insane from execution. The audience is supposed to resent the army for railroading Leonski to his death in order to soothe the civilians in the area, but there is really no good reason why the audience should feel this way. The insanity defense has its proponents and detractors, but the defense lawyer's impassioned sense of army wrongdoing can hardly elicit sympathy in our own time in view of the problems that came with the proliferation of that defense.

Death of a Soldier demonstrates how unsatisfactorily murder is dealt with in real life. From detection to arrest to trial to punishment, the imperfect efforts of fallible human beings lead to errors and moral loose ends. It is for exactly this reason that some of us find a need for fictional murder, detection, and punishment. *Death of a Soldier* brings back a little-remembered corner of World War II, and offers some dated pieties about insanity and the law. But it provides little in the way of mystery, detection, motive, or suspense.

THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Teresa Black of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Honorable mentions go to Gregory E. Murray of Louisville, Kentucky; Wanda Blank Freynick of Alexandria, Virginia; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Mary Maxine Parrish of Prairie Village, Kansas; Pat Lenker of Winner, South Dakota; John Dalbec of Youngstown, Ohio; Martha Ann Robertson of Rocky Face, Georgia; Charles Mitchell of Abilene, Texas; Anita Courtenay Halprin of Sylvan Lake, Michigan; R. A. Boris of Golden, Colorado; Johanna Boggero of Fresno, California; Charles McArthur of Toronto, Canada; I. Bernard of New York, New York; and Justin Huse of Ransom Canyon, Texas.

PRAYER TOWER by Teresa Black

"Oh, we must climb the ancient desert prayer tower!" exclaimed Mildred Sauce, one of my clients of Marvelous Mideast Tours.

"That's forbidden," I called with all the authority a twenty-year-old college kid could have over a determined, two hundred pound matron of fifty who had made it clear that she paid thousands for this trip and would do whatever she liked.

Ignoring me, she scurried away from the tour bus towards the sacred structure, kicking up sand in all directions.

I hurried after her, leafing quickly through my guidebook for some phrase to use when the guards stopped her, as they always stop Americans trying to invade the holy spot. But when I reached the entrance, only a blind beggar was seated by the step.

Mildred had disappeared inside.

"Where are the guards?" I asked, half expecting to see them angrily approaching.

He held out his palm with a toothless smile. I reluctantly dropped several coins in.

"Gone," he said with another grin. "All healthy men fight border war at Kháshad."

Suddenly I heard a bloodcurdling scream from inside the tower.

"What was that?!" I cried, wondering whether I should dare go after her.

He held out his palm again. I dropped some more coins in it.

"Guards gone," he said simply. "No one to feed sacred asp."

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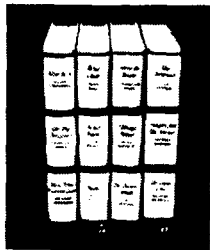
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